

**Reading Technologies, Literary Innovation,  
and a New Fiction**

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### Abstract


This thesis initially uses writing by B.S. Johnson, Giles Gordon, and contributors to Gordon's 1975 anthology *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, to construct a critical framework by which this 'New Fiction' may be defined. As a critical approach to contemporary writing in the late twenty-first century, The New Fiction constitutes a focused critique of formal conservatism, identifying a literary mainstream failing to learn from the innovations of Modernism and adapt writing methodology to suit the cultural situation of the novel at this time. The New Fiction proposes a range of methodological solutions to this problem, encouraging writing which engages with other media, explores solipsistic and experiential subject matter, and wilfully employs formal and linguistic unorthodoxy. Additionally, The New Fiction confounds the pervasive notion of B.S. Johnson in particular as a 'one-man avant-garde', identifying collaborative and communicative links between he and other innovators such as Ann Quin, Alan Burns, and Eva Figs. In doing so, the thesis provides evidence for an active and coherent literary group supported by publishers Marion Boyars and John Calder, comparable to groups such as the French *nouveau roman*. Neither the critical nor the contextual aspects of The New Fiction as a whole is the subject of sustained critical examination, and a primary goal of this thesis is to contribute substantially to the field in both of these areas, supported by case studies of writing by Johnson and Quin.

A second aim of this thesis is to employ The New Fiction's critical framework, considering the return of several New Fiction writers to mainstream publication in the twenty-first century. New editions, and a new wave of criticism, provide an opportunity to investigate the potential application of The New Fiction as more than simply a historical case study of the avant-garde novel. The latter part of this thesis draws connections between The New Fiction and more recent criticism, examining the critical trajectories which connect Johnson, Gordon, and their collaborators to other critics concerned with literary innovation, and the novel's relationship with new media. This examination is supported by way of direct comparison to twenty-first century American writers, making new critical readings identifying the presence of methodological and ideological similarities in the writing of Mark Z. Danielewski and Jonathan Safran Foer. Ultimately, this thesis argues that The New Fiction continues to provide a valid critique of contemporary writing alongside valuable historical context, in the reading of innovative twenty-first century works.

## Note on Referencing

Several of the works of fiction referred to throughout this thesis make use of a wide range of visual devices. Where an accurate impression of such devices is crucial to the discussion, they have been represented in the form of photo-quotations, and are intended as textual references to the specified works. Additionally, several of the selected works extend their unorthodox treatment of form to other apparatus including page and chapter numeration, titling, footnoting, and illustration. Efforts have been made to devise a method of referencing specific extracts such texts in as sympathetic a manner as possible to the author's design.

B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) is presented in the form of twenty-seven unbound chapters of varying lengths, each untitled, and each bearing its own separate page numeration in place of the more typical cumulative page numeration for the book as a whole. The 1999 New Directions edition of *The Unfortunates* assigns each individual chapter an identifying symbol. To ensure accuracy and simplicity, this use of symbols has been incorporated into this thesis' referencing. Corresponding symbols are therefore employed in place of chapter titles, using the following format:

B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*,  p. 1 (London: New Directions, 1999)

Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) contains two distinct narratives, each with a unique narrator, printed inverted and horizontally opposite one another on each page. As such, each page of the novel bears two sets of page numeration, dependant on the narrator whose text faces the reader. Again to ensure accuracy and simplicity, page references for this text are given alongside the initial of the narrator ('S' for Sam, and 'H' for Hailey) to whom each extract pertains, in the following format:

Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. S8 (London: New Directions, 2006)

In addition, and again for clarity, where texts attributed to both narrators are to be compared, extracts will be presented side by side with a separate reference for each, even where both extracts are drawn from the same physical page.

## Chapter 1: Introduction: B.S. Johnson, Giles Gordon and a New Fiction

### 1.1 What is the 'New Fiction'?

The term 'New Fiction' is employed by the Scottish author, editor and literary agent Giles Gordon (1940-2003) to title the 1975 anthology of creative and critical writing *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*. Initially designed as a collaborative project between Gordon and the novelist, poet, playwright and filmmaker B.S. (Bryan Stanley) Johnson (1933-1973), *Beyond the Words* is primarily influenced by Johnson's introductory essay to his own 1973 prose collection *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*. Using critical writing by Johnson, Gordon, and Gordon's contributors, the first half of this thesis constructs the critical framework by which The New Fiction both reads and writes novels. The association between these writers is strengthened by the examination of archival evidence of their correspondence and collaboration, demonstrating that The New Fiction constitutes an informal literary group. Having established The New Fiction as both a critical approach to the novel and an eponymous group of writers exhibiting said approach, this thesis places The New Fiction in context, examining its relationship with modernism, and to contemporaneous writing groups including The Movement and the *Nouveau Roman*. Two case studies are made, of selected novels by B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin, using the established critical and contextual lens to demonstrate the critical reading which The New Fiction facilitates. Focus is placed on the reading of each author's formal devices and methodologies, compared against ideological points expressed by each author and the group as a whole, in order to ask whether these writers fulfilled their stated goals, and to reevaluate current critical view of their work

The second half of this thesis considers the return of critical and creative works by New Fiction writers to mainstream publication in the twenty-first century. Placing The New Fiction in dialogue with post-millennial criticism on technology, new media, and the contemporary novel, the thesis examines the extent to which The New Fiction's perspective has been overlooked as a valuable predecessor to some of the most pervasive arguments in current literary criticism. Key areas of convergence are established between Johnson, Gordon, and their contemporaries, and a range of twenty-first century literary critics, demonstrating the continued validity of The New Fiction argument. This combined approach is then put into practice; two further case studies are made, of selected works by the

twenty-first century American novelists Mark Z. Danielewski and Jonathan Safran Foer, again employing The New Fiction lens and examining its usefulness in relation to various kinds of formal experimentation. Further comparison is made, again in terms of device, methodology, and expressed ideology, to evaluate the extent to which The New Fiction strategies can be said to thrive in a twenty-first century context.

This present chapter introduces Johnson alongside the fractious body of critical works concerning his writing, and contrasts various claims and assumptions made about his work against his own commentary from *Aren't You Rather Young*. This is followed by an introduction to Giles Gordon, and the range of critical arguments presented by Gordon and his selected contributors in *Beyond the Words*. As becomes clear through this discussion, there is a set of common principles shared by the two texts; the 'New Fiction' of Gordon's title, which connects Johnson, Gordon, and Gordon's contributors as a group of like-minded, innovative authors. The final section of this chapter uses this association to challenge the pervasive view of Johnson as a lone dissenting voice in the landscape of 1960s and '70s British fiction. As evidenced by each author's contributions to *Beyond the Words*, The New Fiction is revealed to be a vibrant if informal group on the cusp of a potentially radical literary movement, with a coherent set of critical ideologies, and of which Johnson is a crucial part. As will become clear in the latter part of this thesis, the image of B.S. Johnson carried through for twenty-first century readers is not an isolated figure, but the most prominent of a number of writers challenging the British mainstream, and developing a New Fiction of their own.

## 1.2 B.S. Johnson

Born in London in 1933, Johnson amassed a body of work including drama, poetry, journalism, films, criticism, and seven novels: *Travelling People* (1963), *Albert Angelo* (1964), *Trawl* (1966), *The Unfortunates* (1969), *House Mother Normal* (1971), *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), and *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975), the last published after his suicide in 1973. This chapter, however, focuses on Johnson as literary critic, with particular attention to the acerbic introduction to Johnson's third prose collection, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Johnson presents the most unapologetic

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson's other published works include *Poems* (1964) and *Poems 2* (1971), as editor *The Evacuees* (1968), *London Consequences* (a collaborative novel authored by multiple writers and edited by Johnson and Margaret



of apologia, outlining the rationale behind his development of a challenging literary aesthetic, and the fundamental novelistic practices underpinning his writing methods. Though frequently tongue-in-cheek and at times self-contradictory, Johnson's essay locates his work in relation to a British literary mainstream threatened by technology, stifled by tradition, and devoid of invention. Firstly, however, a resurgence of interest in this work that has emerged in the twenty-first century offers a useful dividing line against which to outline the body of related criticism concerning Johnson, separating pre-millennial criticism written during the twenty-seven years following Johnson's death from the substantially larger body of post-millennial critical writing. This chapter examines the divides which exist in criticism of Johnson, and identifies problems of contextual positioning, generic identification, and critical terminology which characterise this body of work in relation to Johnson's own critical writing.

Broad discussions of 'experimental' fiction in the 1960s and '70s like Ronald Hayman's *The Novel Today: 1967-1975* (1976) identify Johnson's pivotal role in pushing the boundaries of the novel, describing the mainstream pressure and drive for innovation which Johnson experienced:

The 'difficult' novelist is liable to be squeezed out of the market altogether, while many are writing as if nothing mattered except to keep the reader constantly entertained.

Before the war, *avant-gardisme* went hand in hand with obscurity, but today the most obviously 'experimental' writer is not necessarily the most difficult. B.S. Johnson's concern to make his work available to a wide reading public became increasingly evident.<sup>2</sup>

Many earlier critical readings similarly focus on the lack of serious attention – critical or commercial – paid to Johnson, citing the “experimental” and “difficult” nature of his work as a significant cause. Johnson's complex relationship with innovation and mainstream appeal is reiterated by Anthony Burgess in *Beyond the Words*:

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Drabble, 1972) and *All Bull: The National Servicemen* (1973), and as writer and/or director the films *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* (1967), *Paradigm* (1968), *The Unfortunates* (1969), *The Evacuees* (1969), *Up Yours Too Guillaume Apollinaire!* (1969), *Unfair!* (1970), *March!* (1970), *Poem* (1971), *B.S. Johnson on Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1972), *Not Counting the Savages* (1972, dir. Mike Newell) and *Fat Man on a Beach* (1974, dir. Michael Bakewell). Johnson's shorter prose works appear in *Street Children* (1964), his collaboration with photographer Julia Trevelyan Oman, *Statement Against Corpses* (1964), a collaboration with novelist and poet Zulfikar Ghose, and *You Always Remember the First Time* (1975), co-edited with Giles Gordon and Michael Bakewell.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hayman, *The Novel Today: 1967-1975* (London: Longman Group, 1976) p. 6

He had the courage and the devotion to the fictional art which makes a writer turn away from the obvious and the facile. Hence his restless searching for new things. He could have been popular, but he preferred to play some part in the development of the novel.<sup>3</sup>

Burgess declares Johnson's writing skill to hold significant potential for wider popularity, yet also identifies a compulsion to "develop" the novel, a quest for the new which in the eyes of many stifled that potential. Burgess goes on to suggest why an author whom he would credit with "keeping the novel alive"<sup>4</sup> remained in relative obscurity:

I do not think his readers let him down, but I am sure his critics did. He lacked an American audience, which was a great pity: in America he would have found a critical response more serious and painstaking than was ever possible in England.<sup>5</sup>

Hayman's and Burgess' view of the dearth of 'serious attention' paid to Johnson's body of work is accurate of its time. Johnson is routinely cited in studies of twentieth century British literature, but predominantly in general terms, without critical analysis. Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* cites *House Mother Normal* as an example of specific avant-garde techniques,<sup>6</sup> whilst in *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*, Randall Stevenson names Johnson as an author "expanding on the self-consciousness of modernist art",<sup>7</sup> yet Johnson is used primarily as a supporting example to indicate broad literary trends rather than as a primary subject of discussion. Johnson is recognised by such critics as a writer of significant skill and dedication to fictional craft, but these readings bear the burden of Johnson's identification as an experimental writer and as one whose challenges to the literary mainstream ensured that he could never belong to it.

Focused, contemporaneous critical readings of Johnson's work are sparse, with notable exceptions including pieces by Patrick Parrinder, Robert S. Ryf and Morton P. Levitt.<sup>8</sup> The largest body of focused criticism on Johnson from the pre-millennial period can be found in a dedicated issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* from 1985, which

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Burgess, 'Essay' p. 19 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975) pp. 19-21

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 21

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 19

<sup>6</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) p. 183

<sup>7</sup> Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 202

<sup>8</sup> See Patrick Parrinder, 'Pilgrim's Progress: The Novels of B.S. Johnson (1933-1973)' (1977), Robert S. Ryf, 'B.S. Johnson and the Frontiers of Fiction' (1977) and Morton P. Levitt, 'The Novels of B.S. Johnson: Against the War against Joyce' (1982).

includes close readings by critics including Nicolas Tredell, Judith Mackrell and Paul M. D'Eath,<sup>9</sup> extracts from Johnson's own *Travelling People* and *Aren't You Rather Young?*, and shorter pieces written in memoriam by friends and contemporaries such as Eva Figes and Zulfikar Ghose.<sup>10</sup> The volume as a whole suggests that Johnson's contemporaries regarded him highly, but in *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* (2007) Philip Tew and Glyn White summarise a pervading understanding of Johnson as "a marginal figure, virtually forgotten, and only occasionally referred to by those writing about British literature of the 1960s and 70s very much in passing, as a representative of 'the experimental novel.'"<sup>11</sup> Johnson is, to reiterate, regularly identified as an isolated figure, whose experimentation denied him mainstream readership. Considering post-millennial criticism, Tew and White go on to cite Jonathan Coe's biography of Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, as a major catalyst for change.<sup>12</sup> In addition to *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson*, Johnson is discussed at length in post-millennial publications by Tew and White, Tredell, Francis Booth, Vanessa Guignery, Martin Ryle and Julia Jordan.<sup>13</sup> The situation of Johnson within a tradition of innovative British writing is largely sustained in this body of criticism. Johnson is additionally cited throughout general studies of contemporary and experimental writing by Tew, Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, and Dominic Head.<sup>14</sup> Also notable is the range of published journal articles about Johnson's work early in this period, including further pieces by Tew, Coe, Kaye Mitchell, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Tracy Hargreaves.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Nicolas Tredell, 'The Truths of Lying: Albert Angelo', Tredell, 'Telling Life, Telling Death: The Unfortunates', Judith Mackrell, 'B.S. Johnson and the British Experimental Tradition: An Introduction' and Paul M. D'Eath's 'B.S. Johnson and the Consolation of Literature'.

<sup>10</sup> See Eva Figes, 'B.S. Johnson' and Zulfikar Ghose, 'Bryan'.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Tew and Glyn White, 'Introduction: Re-reading B.S. Johnson' p. 3 In: Philip Tew and Glyn White (eds.), *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) pp. 3-13

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (2001), Tew in David James, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (2012), Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (2005), Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* (2004, second edition 2010), Francis Booth, *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940 – 1980* (2012), Vanessa Guignery in Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960s* (2007) Julia Jordan, *Chance and the Modern British Novel: From Henry Green to Irish Murdoch* (2011), and Martin Ryle and Julia Jordan (eds.), *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde* (2014).

<sup>14</sup> See Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (2004, second edition 2007), Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), and Dominic Head, *Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Tew, '(Re)-Acknowledging B.S. Johnson's Radical Realism, or Re-Publishing *The Unfortunates*' (2001), Coe, 'Great Spunky Unflincher': Laurence Sterne, B.S. Johnson and Me' (2004), Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Anatomy of an Obsession: Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs by B.S. Johnson' (2007), and

Some newer writing on Johnson continues to assert the view of Johnson as something of an anomaly. During his introduction to *Like a Fiery Elephant*, Coe describes Johnson as “Britain’s one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s”,<sup>16</sup> stating of contemporaries including Alan Burns, Ann Quin and Eva Figes that “they were not as famous as he was, they were not as good at putting their names about”.<sup>17</sup> Coe’s descriptor diminishes Johnson’s colleagues, collaborators and peers, including several of those Johnson declared to be writing “as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter”<sup>18</sup> in *Aren’t you Rather Young*.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in earlier criticism Johan Thielemans states of Johnson that “he wanted to be the leader of an avant-garde generation”,<sup>20</sup> and Judith Mackrell makes similar claims, describing him to be “preparing the formal and the critical territory”<sup>21</sup> for avant-garde writers. Such allusions to a community of innovative writers around Johnson are sparse and warrant substantiation. To this end, the following section examines the critical positions outlined in *Aren’t You Rather Young?*, acknowledging their flaws, but identifying a set of methodological and ideological criteria by which Johnson may be compared or contrasted against his peers

### **1.3 Aren’t you Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs? (1973)**

Johnson’s introduction to *Aren’t You Rather Young?* is widely cited in critical readings, primarily owing to the frank discussion Johnson presents therein on the subject of writing practice and the contemporary British mainstream. Mackrell describes Johnson’s piece as both an “extensive and clearly articulated account of his position”,<sup>22</sup> and “a clear indication of the issues he is grappling with”, outlining “the perimeters of his critical territory”.<sup>23</sup>

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Tracy Hargreaves, “...To Find a Form that Accommodates the Mess’: Truth Telling from Doris Lessing to B.S. Johnson” (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004) p. 3

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 29

<sup>19</sup> Johnson’s list includes Samuel Beckett, John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Angela Carter, Eva Figes, Giles Gordon, Wilson Harris, Rayner Heppenstall, Robert Nye, Ann Quin, Penelope Shuttle, Alan Sillitoe, Stefan Themerson, John Wheway and Heathcote Williams.

<sup>20</sup> Johan Thielemans, ‘Albert Angelo or B.S. Johnson’s Paradigm of Truth’ p. 2, In: *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1985, 5:2) pp. 81-7

<sup>21</sup> Judith Mackrell, ‘B.S. Johnson and the British Experimental Tradition: An Introduction’ p. 63 In: *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1985, 5:2) pp. 42-64

<sup>22</sup> Judith Mackrell, ‘B.S. Johnson and the British Experimental Tradition: An Introduction’ p. 42

<sup>23</sup> Mackrell, *op. cit.* p. 43

Parrinder calls Johnson's introduction "his most important fictional manifesto",<sup>24</sup> and Mackrell asserts its necessity for the critical reader:

Any reading of his novels must take into account, not only the nature of Johnson's commitment to literary experiment, but also the degree to which it is both fuelled and influenced by the critical campaign which he is waging.<sup>25</sup>

Post-millennial criticism continues to place importance on Johnson's introduction. It is cited repeatedly in Tew's *The Contemporary British Novel*, and by editors Coe, Tew and Jordan alongside its reproduction in *Well Done God!* (2013). The serious nature of Johnson's commentary is, however, questioned by several critics. Tredell in particular refers to both the sincerity of Johnson's critique and its wilfully indulgent, ironic elements, describing it to be "a manifesto, a polemic, a call to action: a self-promotion, self-justification, self-definition, self-dramatization; a stocktaking in which he considers all his novels except the then unpublished *See the Old Lady Decently*".<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Johnson simultaneously presents firm views on the writing of literature and a near-parodic representation of his own ideals and methods – and Johnson's propensity to mix serious debate with exaggeration in the form of self-aggrandisement and aggressive polemicism is perhaps the cause for Tredell's further comment on the difficult dichotomy at work in Johnson's critical views:

Johnson sometimes denied, in fact, that he had views on the novel in general, and claimed to speak only for himself. But at other times, he seems to have felt a sense of isolation, and to have wanted to effect a more comprehensive reorientation of the English novel.<sup>27</sup>

Johnson's essay, then, is not without controversy in terms of its direct applicability. A novelist noted for incorporating extremities of both self-effacement and -importance in his own expression of the authorial role, Johnson's criticism walks a narrow line between a serious desire to enhance the critical understanding of the novel, and a boisterous play-acting of his own exaggerations. Coe offers the following succinct description:

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Parrinder, 'Pilgrim's Progress: The Novels of B.S. Johnson (1933-1973)' p. 48 In: *Critical Quarterly* Vol. 19, No. 2, 1977 pp. 45-59

<sup>25</sup> Mackrell, *op. cit.* p. 42

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson (Second Revised and Updated Edition)* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2010) p. 21

<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson (Second Revised and Updated Edition)* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2010) p. 22

One of the last important things B.S. Johnson wrote, about six months before he died, was an introduction to his collection of 'shorter prose', *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*. This essay became, and remains, probably the most famous and fervently quoted item in the Johnson oeuvre: a belligerent critique of the conservatism of modern British writing, and an impassioned apologia for his own methods.<sup>28</sup>

In this extract, Coe indicates why the piece has such appeal despite its problematic qualities. Though the aggressive manner in which Johnson criticises contemporary writing appears deliberately provocative and even comical, the appraisal of his own writing in response to the climate he describes remains clearly applicable and historically relevant. As David James observes, Johnson's essay is largely a "parodic attempt at writing his 'memoirs'"<sup>29</sup> yet, in turn, "Johnson sounds prescriptive, when in fact he is passing on advice".<sup>30</sup> Through a layering of self-ironising outbursts and exaggerations, Johnson's essay exhibits coherent "strategies for contesting the critical tendencies of his readers".<sup>31</sup> As Tredell concludes, "In his statements about the novel, Johnson can sound dogmatic, aggressive, Puritanical, authoritarian; but his ideas, even when they seem wrongheaded or unacceptable, are provocative and challenging."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in *Reading the Graphic Surface*, Glyn White advises against taking Johnson's Introduction as an isolated source of guidance for reading:

Without a clear concept of the graphic surface, critics are ill-prepared to deal with the formal diversity of Johnson's novels and tend to go little further than list their idiosyncracies and use Johnson's own theorising to deal with the issues raised [...] Though the piece is both a revealing and fascinating document about Johnson and his work, its belligerent and sometimes paradoxical argumentation has helped skew the general critical reaction to Johnson's work [...] the 'Introduction' is generally taken, whether in sympathy with its views or in order to expose their shortcomings and contradictions, to be something of a manifesto, to the extent it has almost become B.S. Johnson, in his absence. Posthumous criticism, obliged to accept the fact that Johnson can no longer be persuaded to change his ways, is forced to come to terms, perhaps not happily, with the works he has left behind.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004) p. 13

<sup>29</sup> David James, 'The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in *Albert Angelo*' p. 27 in: Philip Tew and Glyn White (eds.), *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) pp. 27-37

<sup>30</sup> David James, *op. cit.* p. 30

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* p. 22

<sup>33</sup> Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface* pp.85-6 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)

Though acknowledging the Introduction's importance, White also recognises the ease with which such an insistently abrasive critical document introduces imbalance to the reading of Johnson's novels. It is with this problematic quality in mind that the reading of the Introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young* is best made. The remainder of this section primarily aims to introduce the key themes and arguments present in Johnson's essay, employing it not as the lone relevant source for critiquing Johnson's writing, but as the contextual beginning of a broader set of arguments which inform the reading of Johnson alongside his contemporaries. Despite the manner of its expression, there exists within Johnson's essay a set of challenges and provocations which are themselves key to outlining (and thus applying) his novelistic ideals. Though in itself perhaps ill-suited to formulating a comprehensive reading of Johnson's novels, the Introduction nevertheless provides valuable groundwork for identifying the key arguments of the broader New Fiction group.

The introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young?* is most commonly read in terms of its inclinations toward formal radicalism, alongside its unashamedly aggressive attack on literary conservatism and traditionalism. Crucially, beneath these complaints and denouncements, the essay reveals a devotion to novelistic form and methodology, and interrogation of these in relation to the emergent narrative technologies of the period, cinema and television drama. Johnson's "critical campaign" contrasts two distinct forms of narrative media. Drawing from his experiences as both novelist and filmmaker, Johnson pays tribute to James Joyce's recognition that "film must usurp some of the prerogatives which until then had belonged almost exclusively to the novelist."<sup>34</sup> The prerogatives Johnson refers to are those of storytelling, which he asserts to be achieved "more directly, in less time and with more concrete detail"<sup>35</sup> in film. The novel is, for Johnson, challenged by technologically advanced narrative media, and he emphasises the advantageous position held by cinema:

Why should anyone who simply wanted to be told a story spend all his spare time for a week or weeks reading a book when he could experience the same thing in a version in some ways superior at his local cinema in only one evening?<sup>36</sup>

Johnson's response is to argue that the threat of an emergent, technologically-advanced medium demands a new model of novel-writing which aspires to more than simply the telling

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<sup>34</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't you Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?*, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 11

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

of stories. Though the manner of address taken is less formally critical and is even tonally reminiscent of Johnson's novels, there remains a clear critical comment to be drawn from this section of the essay. Placing the threat of obsolescence in a wider context, Johnson indicates that a medium's dominance over a cultural role such as storytelling is necessarily transient, relating his observations to the tradition of narrative poetry:

Long narrative poems were bestsellers right up to the works of Walter Scott and Byron. The latter supplanted the former in the favours of the public, and Scott adroitly turned from narrative poems to narrative novels and continued to be a bestseller. You will agree it would be perversely anachronistic to write a long narrative poem today? People still do, of course; but such works are rarely published, and, if they are, the writer is thought of as a literary flatearther.<sup>37</sup>

The shift from the long narrative poem to the novel takes place upon the emergence of a new form, and through Johnson's hyperbole there exists a logical extension of this principle to describe an emergent medium in the same terms. One sees, in Johnson's adoption of this position, an argument for writing which avoids the anachronism and "perversity" of which the mainstream literary climate is accused.

The rise of film and television constitutes only half of the problem which Johnson identifies. Analogizing in terms of a range of media, Johnson identifies an inadaptability to the new, and the assumption of prerogatives which are better fulfilled elsewhere. Johnson identifies further threats to the novel from within: a lack of progression based on assumptions which are no longer sustainable, and a culture of mainstream writing which fails to respond to either the lessons of its history or the challenges of its future. More than simply observer and commentator, Johnson uses *Aren't You Rather Young* to summarize his exploration of ways to invigorate the modern novel. Johnson emphasises materiality, internality, consciousness, and authorship, and in his most explicit statement of intent, offers the following:

The novel may not only survive but evolve to greater achievements by concentrating on those things it can still do best: the precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book, the explication of thought. Film is an excellent medium for showing things, but it is very poor at taking an audience inside characters' minds, at telling it what people are thinking.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 12



Johnson calls for an authorial engagement with the print novel itself, indicating three areas of focus better explored by the novel than any other medium. David John Davies describes Johnson's goal to be "a more specialized, difficult terrain, the consciousness of modern man. Johnson was one of the few writers of the sixties and seventies prepared to explore and exploit the features of that terrain".<sup>39</sup> Johnson indicates his personal admiration for Joyce in his discussion of new narrative media; Davies' reading reveals the more pervasive influence of Joyce's modernism on Johnson's literary ideologies.

Johnson's critique alludes to the complacency bred by a readership who "simply wanted to be told a story", and it is in this telling of stories which Johnson identifies an argument sustained throughout his novelistic output. The desire in a reader to simply know 'what happens next' – and to craft a story which panders to this desire – is built upon dishonesty:

Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies.<sup>40</sup>

This perceived dishonesty is again embedded within technological concerns. If the emergence of cinema results in the usurpation of the storytelling function, the reliance upon this function constitutes a failure to appropriately respond to contemporary technological advances. The 'lies' which Johnson identifies are, to reiterate, built upon the assumption of key cultural prerogatives which arguably no longer belong to the print novel:

Present-day reality is changing rapidly; it always has done, but for each generation it appears to be speeding up. Novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling forms from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and not Dickens' reality or Hardy's reality or even James Joyce's reality.

Present-day reality is markedly different from nineteenth-century reality. Then it was possible to believe in pattern and eternity, but today what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> David John Davies, 'The Book as Metaphor: Artifice and Experiment in the Novels of B.S. Johnson' p. 72 In: *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1985 pp. 72-6

<sup>40</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 14

<sup>41</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* pp. 16-7

What emerges through Johnson's commentary is a clear desire to represent truth, and to avoid the falsehood and misdirection of fiction. In doing so, Johnson attributes assumptions about the role of fiction to the reliance on nineteenth-century models of realism, prevalent in the main stream of contemporary writing he addresses, and argues that a new interpretation of realism is necessary to achieve his aims.<sup>42</sup>

The remainder of Johnson's essay examines each of his novels in terms of their technical and formal devices, indicating his rationale. Clear within Johnson's exposition is an assertion that his combined or invented forms are rigorously novelistic, and specific in their functional goals. In emphasising aspects of form and media-specificity, Johnson insists that his unorthodox approach to writing is no more than a logical act of problem-solving. As Davies later states, "Johnson strenuously disliked the label "experimental" that was given to his novels and insisted that he was simply writing the kind of novel that needed to be written, now that the cinema and television had usurped the novel's story-telling function".<sup>43</sup> Johnson invents devices, in his words, "to solve problems which I felt could not be dealt with in other ways",<sup>44</sup> thereby reconciling the solipsistic nature of his subject matter and "the technological fact of the bound book".<sup>45</sup> Johnson asserts the following:

Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems.<sup>46</sup>

Johnson's interpretation of success in this extract relates specifically to the functionality of the devices employed in his writing, above all else. Indeed, Johnson indicates his priorities in this regard when he states that "The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives".<sup>47</sup> The re-prioritisation which Johnson demands from his readers reflects a crucial opposition between his understanding of experimentation, and that of the broader critical mainstream. Johnson views experimentation as a key component of writing but,

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<sup>42</sup> Chapter 2 of this thesis further explores Johnson's criticism of realism, and argument for a new understanding of truth and the real in the modern novel.

<sup>43</sup> Davies, *op. cit.* p. 76

<sup>44</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* pp. 22-3

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 25

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 19

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

crucially, a process which has been completed, and its conclusions reflected, in the completed and published novel. Lynn Wells summarises as much, describing Johnson's rejection of the term to be rooted in its implication of "a sort of playful tinkering with form, a hit-or-miss approach".<sup>48</sup> The term remains problematic, as Wells goes on to state; "despite Johnson's rejection of the experimentalist label, it remains associated with him to this day".<sup>49</sup> Still, the language of experimentalism appears to be held over Johnson's writing as a badge of failure, a sign of his novels' inability to create a sufficiently generalised version of truth to appeal to a readership deeply ingrained with existing realist models. Johnson's argument about problem-solving appears to identify this application of critical terminology as a fundamental misunderstanding of his aims, and Johnson expresses near-comical outrage that this should be the case. Yet, the key points of Johnson's commentary seem reminiscent of Viktor Shlovsky's writing in *Theory of Prose* on the subject of formal and literary devices:

There are those who think that the purpose of art is to facilitate something or to inspire or to generalize [...] And yet, those who have looked deeply into this matter know better. Indeed, how thoroughly alien is generalization to art. How much closer it is to "particularization" [...] The practical mind seeks generalizations by creating, insofar as possible, wide-ranging, all-encompassing formulas. Art, on the contrary, with its "longing for the concrete" (Carlyle), is based on a step-by-step structure and on the particularizing of even that which is presented in a generalized and unified form.<sup>50</sup>

Johnson reveals himself as one who would reject the requirement of generalisation; using Shlovsky one may identify Johnson's intent to particularise, rather than to generalise, and thus clarify his rationale for rejecting the criteria by which his writing is identified experimental. Indeed, whilst occupying the 'generalised and unified form' of the novel, Johnson employs devices which are particular to the experiential truth he aims to convey – a process Shlovsky describes not as radical, but fundamental to creative practice itself. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis clarify this in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*:

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<sup>48</sup> Lynn Wells, 'What's New, Again?: B.S. Johnson's Experimentalism' p. 27 In: *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* (4.1/4.2, 2011) pp. 27-36

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Viktor Shlovsky, 'The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style' p. 22 in: Viktor Shlovsky, *Theory of Prose (Translated by Benjamin Sher)* (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990) pp. 15-51

To the extent that a work of art can be experienced, to the extent that it *is*, it is like any other object. It may “mean” in the same way that any object means; it has, however, one advantage – it is designed especially for perception, for attracting and holding attention. Thus it not only bears meaning, it forces an awareness of its reading upon the reader.<sup>51</sup>

If truth is Johnson’s ultimate goal, then the design of new writing models, particularised to the truth he aims to represent, is the means by which Johnson proposes to achieve it. This is confirmed in David James’ reading of *Albert Angelo*:

He emphasises that a reader’s engagement with the tangible layout of *Albert Angelo* can, and should be, immanently performative. That is to say, our reflexive interaction with aspects of its typography should be *enacted* across the text as a whole. Johnson is clearly insistent upon the power of visible form in mediating his reader’s emotional and pragmatic transactions with the text.<sup>52</sup>

Though favouring provocative and parodic modes in the writing of his essay, Johnson continually provides guidance for the reading of his devices, critics like James and Tredell opt to extract key points from within these arguments to facilitate criticism of Johnson’s works. Wells, too, goes on to focus on the manner in which Johnson’s essay exemplifies his combative approach to the “charges of gimmickry and social irresponsibility”<sup>53</sup> and reveals a set of clear critical arguments about the novel:

Johnson’s unique approach to fiction [...] evolved from a history of international experimental art, responded to the aesthetic conservatism of his contemporary moment and created a lasting influence owing to his insistence on the integral link between form and truthful representation.<sup>54</sup>

In a broader sense, Johnson’s essay clearly can be – and has been – employed to establish a set of writing priorities, partially obscured by misdirection and effacement, yet coherent and applicable as a model for reading with critical context borrowed from Shlovsky.

Shlovsky is again informative on why the proposed reinventions of literary realism may be viewed as a crucial aspect of writing practice and as a serious literary endeavour,

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<sup>51</sup> Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Introduction to ‘Art as Technique’, p. 4 In: Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* pp. 3-24 (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965)

<sup>52</sup> David James, ‘The (W)hole Affect’ p. 30

<sup>53</sup> Lynn Wells, ‘What’s New, Again?: B.S. Johnson’s Experimentalism’ p. 28

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

engaged with a clear literary history, rather than an anomaly. Shlovsky describes Leo Tolstoy's use of the device of estrangement, outlining the importance of avoiding generalised, automatic understanding of the poetic image:

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously – automatically [...] It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech with its fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words [...] By means of [an] algebraic method of thinking, objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we see only its surface. Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away [...] And so, accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.

If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been. And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to knowledge of a thing throughout the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "estranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious". The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest.<sup>55</sup>

Johnson's criticism of realism appears closely related to Shlovsky's description of automatisisation: the general, habitual reading practice encouraged by a long-established writing model demands less of the reader, discourages close attention to the relationship between the text and the real world experienced by the reader, and bears little relation to the half-articulated, fragmentary qualities of natural communications and experiences. In turn, the creation of unorthodox form, estranged from literary convention, demands closer attention to these relationships, and communicates more directly with the real by refusing to allow automatisisation. David James summarises a similar process, a clear indication that Shlovsky remains informative in relation to more modern criticism:

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<sup>55</sup> Viktor Shlovsky, 'Art as Device' pp. 5-6 in: Victor Shlovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Translated by Benjamin Sher) pp. 1-14

Johnson not only turns dissonance into a formal attribute, but also implies that such an approach to the novel as a form can advertise the artistry from which it is fashioned *and* embrace the ethos of self-exposition to which Johnson so candidly subscribes.<sup>56</sup>

Shlovsky's argument resolves one of the key contradictions seemingly at work in Johnson's criticism; though the artifice clearly apparent in the self-conscious creation of form appears logically opposite to realism, it also highlights the relation between literature and the real. The New Fiction argues that long-established and highly prescriptive models of realism fail to achieve this, and though this argument is rarely recognised in contemporaneous readings, it is clearly present in Formalist and Modernist criticism prior to the group's time of writing, and sustains a presence in later, post-millennial criticism. *Aren't You Rather Young* becomes, in this light, a valuable milestone by which the two can be connected.

Beneath its hyperbole, Johnson's introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young* supplies an overview of his approach to the novel, indicating key areas fundamental to its ongoing relevance. A close attention to the printed book's relationship with other media, emphasising the specific strengths of the print novel, would ensure that the novel remains in dialogue with its contemporary environment, communicating with and borrowing from emergent technologies and trends. A revision of what one considers novelistic subject matter, focusing on the experiential and the solipsistic, employs the lessons learned from Modernism to continue its progress, rather than stifling it. In the same vein, a willingness to abandon traditional approaches to the novel and devise new forms and techniques carefully attuned to such subject matters would ensure that such ambitious novelistic intent is not held back by the limitations of outdated models. A constant attention to novelistic practice, acts of problem-solving, and the logical and functional properties of the contemporary book underpin Johnson's wilful unorthodoxy in a manner often overlooked by contemporaneous critics. With such criteria being somewhat diminished by Johnson's polemic, it is perhaps understandable that critical readers would identify him as frustrated and isolated. Yet, as White argues, "regarding Johnson as a confused and beleaguered figure tempts us to revert to psychologism and cast him as a martyr to experimental literary puritanism [...] we *must* deal with the texts themselves first and foremost, and not the author or authorial theory".<sup>57</sup> An appraisal of the

<sup>56</sup> David James, *The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in Albert Angelo* p. 31

<sup>57</sup> Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface* p. 87

arguments contained within Johnson's commentary reveals a loose critical model which is connected and comparable to existing criticism; it is not, perhaps, a trusty guide to the reading of Johnson's novels, but nevertheless a valuable set of tools with which he may be contextualised amongst his peers. To this end, by returning to Giles Gordon and *Beyond the Words*, one sees that Johnson is not as isolated as much pre-millennial criticism implies, but rather the loudest amongst many critical voices. If Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young* is difficult to accept as a functional manifesto in and of itself, Gordon's text reveals that it most certainly provides the groundwork for another.

#### 1.4 Giles Gordon, and *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*

Born in Edinburgh in 1940, Giles Gordon is primarily recognised as an editor and literary agent, recalled in obituaries following his death in 2003 as "one of the most astute and well-connected literary agents in the business"<sup>58</sup> with a "keen interest in his clients as people as well as profitable functionaries".<sup>59</sup> Gordon also authored the novels *The Umbrella Man* (1971), *About a Marriage* (1972) and *Girl with Red Hair* (1974) prior to the publication of *Beyond the Words*,<sup>60</sup> a text bearing original creative works and critical commentary from Gordon himself and ten other selected writers,<sup>61</sup> and providing an overview of fifteen years of innovative writing and challenging critical thought in Britain between 1960 and 1975. Gordon dedicates an entire chapter of his 1993 memoir *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?* to the composition of *Beyond the Words*, with a particular focus made explicit in its title: 'Conspiring with B.S. Johnson'. Gordon describes similarities between himself and Johnson, stating a shared desire to "kick fresh life into the novel, to relate it in some degree to aesthetics, to typography and graphic design".<sup>62</sup> *Aren't we Due a Royalty Statement?*

<sup>58</sup> Obituaries: 'Giles Gordon' In: *The Daily Telegraph* (17/11/2003) para. 1 of 16

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1446732/Giles-Gordon.html> [accessed 7/1/14]

<sup>59</sup> Dennis Barker, 'Obituary: Giles Gordon' In: *The Guardian* (17/11/2003) para. 1 of 18

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/nov/17/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries> [accessed 7/1/14]

<sup>60</sup> Gordon would come to publish the novels *100 Scenes from Married Life: A Selection* (1976), *Enemies: A Novel about Friendship* (1977) and *Ambrose's Vision: Sketches towards the Creation of a Cathedral* (1980). In addition, Gordon produced four collections of short prose; *Pictures from an Exhibition* (1970), *Farewell, Fond Dreams* (1975), *The Illusionist and Other Fictions* (1978) and *Couple* (1978). Gordon also collaborated with Johnson and Bakewell on *You Always Remember the First Time* (1975), and produced a memoir in 1993 titled *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?: A Stern Account of Literary, Publishing and Theatrical Folk*.

<sup>61</sup> The eleven writers of Gordon's title are, in addition to Gordon himself, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Elspeth Davie, Eva Figs, B.S. Johnson, Gabriel Josipovici, Robert Nye, David Plante, Ann Quin and Maggie Ross, each of whom are profiled in further detail in section 1.5 of this chapter, with the exceptions of Johnson and Quin who are discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis respectively.

<sup>62</sup> Giles Gordon, *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?* pp. 151-2

provides evidence that Gordon was at least one sympathetic critical voice prepared to collaborate with Johnson, and this is reinforced by the content of *Beyond the Words* itself:

After I had read Bryan Johnson's introduction, I suggested to him that he and I might compile an anthology of previously unpublished work by those we considered to be among the most worth while [sic] of contemporary British writers. We suggested to Messrs Hutchinson, our own publishers, that they might commission the book. On the day on which they agreed, I telephoned B.S. Johnson to inform him. The phone seemed permanently engaged. It wasn't until the following day I was told that he had killed himself a few hours before I tried to speak to him.

Charles Clark of Hutchinson persuaded me, absolutely against my feelings at the time, to edit the book on my own.<sup>63</sup>

The introduction Gordon refers to is that of Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young?*, and Gordon describes the original intention for the pair to co-edit *Beyond the Words*. Given the scarcity of critical attention paid to Gordon's writing and *Beyond the Words* itself, and the association that Gordon is keen to draw between it and *Aren't You Rather Young?*, *Beyond the Words* may be read as a continuation and an extension made by Gordon upon Johnson's critical position.

Seen in the context of *Aren't You Rather Young*, Gordon's introduction continues Johnson's exploration of the relationship between print and other media, raising similar observations about authorship and readership. Gordon, however, focuses on the readership encouraged by the proliferation of news media since the rise of mass-produced newspapers in the nineteenth century:

We are conditioned to read thousands of words every day. There are probably more of them in a single issue of *The Times* or the *Guardian* or the *Daily Telegraph* than there are in the average new novel; and we're conditioned, because we lead such 'busy' lives, to read these words – whether in newspaper or book – as fast as we're able to assimilate them.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p.9 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 9-15

<sup>64</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 9



Gordon describes a mainstream influenced by the conditioning effect of news media in mass-publication. Though concerned more directly with the medium of printed text, Gordon's arguments here are similarly coloured by an acute awareness of a rapidly changing technological culture surrounding reading. The main argument which emerges from Gordon's observation is that novelists must view the fundamentals of their craft in relation to other media, and demonstrate through writing that their goals and means are unique:

Most people, in daily currency, use words in what they think of as a fairly literal way. Consequently they are made uneasy if a writer does not use them similarly. They expect a novelist to know more words than they do, and to employ them with greater expertise than they can. Basically though, they expect a 'story' to begin at the beginning (wherever that may be). If the first four words aren't literally 'Once upon a time', the reader should be able to assume they're taken for granted.<sup>65</sup>

With a degree of sarcasm, Gordon expresses a similar disdain to Johnson regarding the desire to know "what happens next", criticising a reading public which expects a comfortable linearity. Clearly, Gordon aligns himself with Johnson's view that the artificiality of fictional narrative is contradictory to established realist modes. A disconnection between the aspirations of the novelist and the expectations of mainstream readership is also implied in Gordon's continuation of these arguments.

Where Johnson cites evidence from British and Irish literary history to support his claims, Gordon chooses specific contemporary targets. As well as highlighting changes in modern readership, Gordon references Karl Miller's *Writing in England Today* as an example of mainstream conservatism and narrowness of scope, describing Miller's text in a manner reminiscent of Johnson's declarations of anachronism:

The book was not merely idiosyncratic, it was perverse. It omitted any writer whose abilities and inclinations were remotely divorced from the, so called, realistic.<sup>66</sup>

Gordon's reading of a faltering realist novel is complemented by *Books 2000*, an earlier talk delivered to the Association of Assistant Librarians in 1969. In declaring the failure of social realism in the modern British novel, Gordon accuses Miller of oversights in his selection of

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<sup>65</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 12

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

authors, each of whom (with the exception of Anthony Burgess who, as indicated by Gordon, is selected by both he and Miller) represents not the exciting future of British fiction, but its stagnation. It is in no uncertain terms that Gordon describes *Beyond the Words* as an “antidote”<sup>67</sup> to Miller’s text. Gordon elaborates on the positioning of *Beyond the Words* within the mainstream of the time, and specifically against Miller’s anthology, in his memoir:

Our anthology was to be different in kind and tone from the usual run of realist fiction approved by the literary editors of the time [...] Bryan and I wanted to provide an antidote, a counterblast to that admittedly influential anthology, something which would get an argument going.<sup>68</sup>

Gordon asserts the importance of a critical eye on the production and reading of modern fiction, indicating once again that an awareness of fictional craft, distinct from the journalistic, is central to this assertion:

I’m asking for a *more* critical approach to fiction – by authors, reviewers and readers, I’d like the reviewer or reader to say to himself: ‘Mr X appears to be doing such and such [...] he uses words in his latest artefact in a way that, if not peculiar to him, is not how they are used in this sentence. He’s intrigued and fascinated by them, by sentences, paragraphs, pages as sounds, shapes, rhythms as well as senses. His meanings aren’t necessarily mine, but that’s no reason to dismiss them’.<sup>69</sup>

Gordon’s emphasis is, like Johnson’s, placed on recognising the technical functions of writing, calling for a modern vision of author- and readership which unites form, style and medium as a singular artefact. Gordon also encourages an awareness of other media forms, citing the influence of newspaper and the writing possibilities afforded by an aesthetic approach built on typography and graphic design. Gordon continues to assert this relationship between media, and expands his reading of contemporary writing, in his introduction to Elspeth Davie’s *The Man Who Wanted to Eat Books, and Other Stories*. He urges writers of a New Fiction to use these means to combat the reliance on modes of narrative which were at best outdated, and at worst actively damaging to perceptions of the novel as a progressive and contemporary medium.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Giles Gordon, *Aren’t we Due a Royalty Statement?* p. 154

<sup>69</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ p. 14

Again like Johnson, Gordon argues that establishing new priorities for the writing of novels does not necessarily constitute an experimental act. In fact, where Johnson declares the 'experimental' label to be a product of conservatism, Gordon asserts that the application of such a label to this New Fiction is impossible. Recognising the history and cultural role of the novel, and its relationships with new media, Gordon argues that this challenging literary endeavour is novelistic, and nothing more:

If content and form are inseparable, both essential aspects of a single artefact, a novel which with skill portrays its author's individual contemporary vision cannot be experimental or avant garde. It can only be itself, a work of fiction.<sup>70</sup>

Viewed in combination, Johnson and Gordon present a set of closely-related arguments. The emergence of new, culturally significant media forms provokes the need for revision in the perceived role of print fiction. Where new media may assume dominance over the role of storytelling, and influence the habits and expectations of mainstream readership, Johnson's and Gordon's response is to suggest a new focus on the material property and activity of writing. Urging the contemporary writer to explore the capabilities uniquely available to the printed word, Johnson and Gordon each present their own vision of how the print novel might thrive as a vital and progressive contemporary medium, in dialogue with newer technologies, and through determinedly novelistic pursuits.

### 1.5 The New Fiction: A Literary Group

Mackrell states that "for much of his writing career, B.S. Johnson regarded himself as one of the very small and embattled minority of writers who were showing any signs of resisting the conservatism of the British literary establishment".<sup>71</sup> The New Fiction provides a sample from this minority, and a brief examination of their writing and correspondence elucidates the parallels between them. Each identifies the novel's ability to react to emergent technologies, and the new culture of reading this ought to provoke. Each identifies traditionalism, a critical conservatism, which stunts this progress. This section provides a brief introduction to the other authors included in *Beyond the Words*, and the manner in which their observations about contemporary writing converge with their editor's.

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<sup>70</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 15

<sup>71</sup> Judith Mackrell, 'B.S. Johnson and the British Experimental tradition' p. 42

Eva Figes outlines ideological similarities between herself, Johnson, Ann Quin and Alan Burns, stating that “the four of us had very different talents and preoccupations, but we shared a common credo, a common approach to writing. All of us were bored to death with mainstream ‘realist’ fiction at a time when, in England, it seemed the only acceptable sort”.<sup>72</sup> Figes contradicts the existing view of Johnson as a lone dissenting voice:

I have only once in my life belonged to something which could be called a literary group, and that came to an end with the death of B.S. Johnson ten years ago. Ann Quin had killed herself by swimming out to sea only weeks before, and shortly after these two deaths Alan Burns, closer to both of them than I had ever been, chose to dig himself in to an American university, and stayed there. Their loss still makes me feel solitary, and bereft.<sup>73</sup>

Figes goes on to outline further similarities, stating that “we were all interested in the book as a physical object, in our attempts to break out of the straitjacket of conventional linear narrative”<sup>74</sup>, and describing a climate of “English conservatism and insularity”<sup>75</sup> which each sought to challenge. Although writing with retrospect of more than ten years after the deaths of Johnson and Quin in 1973, Figes describes their challenge to the mainstream climate:

[Johnson was] consistent in his own way to a belief that Ann, Alan and I all shared with him: the belief that the seamless “realist” novel is not only not realistic, but a downright lie. Of course all fiction is a form of lying, but the realist novel is a dangerous lie because people have come to believe it.<sup>76</sup>

Figes mirrors the criticisms levelled by Johnson and Gordon at mainstream British writing of the day, particularly recalling Johnson’s statement that “telling stories is telling lies”. Adding to Johnson’s and Gordon’s stated desire for a new interpretation of the realistic, Figes asserts that the realist novel does not satisfactorily represent the ‘real’, and states that in this, she, Johnson, Quin and Burns were alike. It is with this set of writers that this section begins, examining the manner in which Figes, Burns and Quin are critically linked to Johnson

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<sup>72</sup> Eva Figes, ‘B.S. Johnson’ p. 70 In: *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1985 pp. 70-1

<sup>73</sup> Figes, *op. cit.* p. 70

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Figes, *op. cit.* p. 71

and Gordon through their contributions to *Beyond the Words*, and sustain this link through their respective bodies of work.

### 1.5.1 Eva Figes

At the time of her inclusion in *Beyond the Words*, Eva Figes (1932-2012) was the author of five novels; *Equinox* (1966), *Winter Journey* (1967), *Konek Landing* (1969), *B* (1972) and *Days* (1974)<sup>77</sup>. Her primary contribution to Gordon's anthology is a work of short fiction titled 'On Stage', and an accompanying piece of critical writing simply titled 'Note'. The links between the arguments posited by Johnson and Gordon and those of Figes are clear, with Figes mirroring both Johnson and Gordon in stating the following:

Let us face it, the old reassurances have long lost their power to reassure. Nobody really believes in them any more. We need new statements. New models of reality. But above all people must be made aware that a statement is being made, and that they are not being offered the gospel according to Saint Anybody.<sup>78</sup>

Figes places her focus on the development of models for writing which challenge "old reassurances". Figes' allegiance to Gordon's cause is implied by her contribution to the *Beyond the Words* project, and clear parallels can be drawn between Figes' criticisms and those previously established by Johnson. Crucially, Figes asserts like Johnson the need for "new models of reality". (Chapter Two of this thesis further discusses the specific critique of literary realism made by The New Fiction writers). Figes' critical input strengthens the comparisons made between Johnson and Gordon, and her selection by both as a writer of note secures her a prominent place in their New Fiction.

Figes' interview for Burns and Charles Sugnet's *The Imagination on Trial* (1981) provides further points of comparison. Figes describes the importance of music to the composition of her work, and when asked what her use of the word 'musical' refers to in her discussion of form, she responds:

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<sup>77</sup> Figes would go on to publish eight further novels; *Nelly's Version* (1977), *Waking* (1981), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages: A Novel* (1986), *Ghosts* (1988), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *The Tenancy* (1993) and *The Knot* (1996). Additionally, Figes published four influential works of criticism: *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (1982), *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Writers to 1850* (1982) and *Women's Letters in Wartime, 1450-1945* (1993)

<sup>78</sup> Figes, Eva, 'Note' p. 114 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, pp. 113-4

Construction. Also, I wanted to make a direct emotional impact through prose, to break through the rational prose structures. Also, the indirectness of music, its capacity to hint at things, to say more than one thing at once, which is very difficult to do in prose.<sup>79</sup>

Demonstrative of Johnson's and Gordon's emphasis on the borrowing of forms from other media to resolve certain writing problems, Figs declares her avoidance of traditional structures in favour of exploring the subtle, indirect forms possible in music.

Figs' creative contribution to *Beyond the Words*, 'On Stage', is generically complex; it may be accurately described as taking the form of a three-act play, albeit one in which the first two 'acts' consist entirely of third-person narrative prose, or indeed as a three-part short story, of which the third part consists entirely of dramatic script. Figs' text reveals and obscures aspects of its narrative, its early stages resembling stage direction without an accompanying script, and constituting a meta-fictional narrative about two characters who arrive on stage with no script to follow:

#### *Act 1*

At the beginning of the play Nelly and Arthur are young, and arrive separately on the empty stage which is initially unlit, bare and deserted. They have apparently come for some sort of amateur dramatic casting session, but nobody else apart from themselves turns up. Arthur frequently announces his intention of leaving but is always prevented from doing so by Nelly, who has come with high expectations and is determined to make something of the situation.<sup>80</sup>

Figs' first act presents frustration mounting in Nelly and Arthur, describing "regressive psychological fits, tears, tantrums, and her terror of being left alone – which arouses his pity".<sup>81</sup> The second act remains scriptless, the pair lurching into declarations, triumphs and taunts without specific indication of their spoken dialogue. Despite seemingly accepting their fate ("being a lover of consistency, she believes in going on as they have begun"<sup>82</sup>), Nelly and Arthur undergo a crisis over their dramatic roles: "She goes to pieces in a

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<sup>79</sup> Eva Figs, 'Eva Figs' p. 35 In: Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial* (London: Allison & Busby, 1981) pp. 31-40

<sup>80</sup> Eva Figs, 'On Stage' p. 115 In: Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 115-127

<sup>81</sup> Figs, *op. cit.* p. 115

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

monologue in which she declares that she cannot go on playing her part”.<sup>83</sup> The final act shifts form entirely, consisting of dramatic dialogue with sparse stage directions, and introducing the characters of the Young Man and the Young Woman alongside the now aged and immobile Nelly and Arthur. Attempting to clear the stage to perform a play of their own, the Young Man and Young Woman are disturbed by the presence of their predecessors:

YOUNG WOMAN: But you can't move all this stuff... not now.

YOUNG MAN: Why not?

YOUNG WOMAN: Because it belongs to her, don't you see, it's her scene. She hasn't finished.

YOUNG MAN: You mean, we've interrupted her last act?

YOUNG WOMAN: Precisely.

YOUNG MAN: Christ, what do we do now? But we've booked the hall.<sup>84</sup>

Figes' writing in 'On Stage' appears to self-consciously mock the activity of placing characters on stage and directing their interactions, drawing – not unlike Johnson – from European modernist writing such as Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In doing so, Figes constructs a clear parody of social realist drama; the kitchen-sink setting reminiscent of playwrights such as John Osborne is seemingly reduced to near-complete inactivity by the restrictions of the chosen form. Using elements of narrative fiction such as third-person narration, and meta-fictional techniques as the characters recognise their entrapment in the stage environment (“That door is painted!”<sup>85</sup>), Figes develops a darkly comic piece which pokes fun at the notion that “Life must be tidy, a well-made play, or one can be accused of having wasted it”<sup>86</sup>. Here, Figes is clearly reminiscent of Johnson's claim that “Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily”.<sup>87</sup> Such devices are also employed by Johnson, the opening section of his second novel *Albert Angelo* taking the form of a dark but comic playscript:

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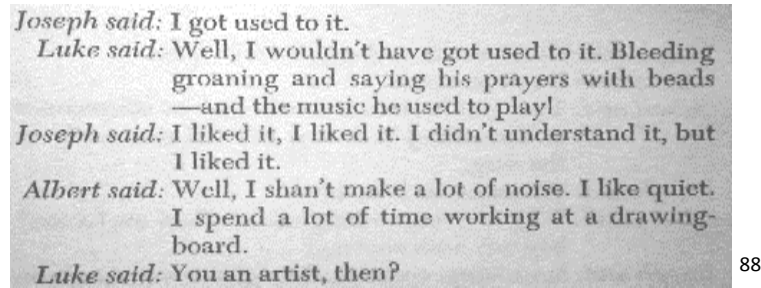
<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Figes, *op. cit.* p. 119

<sup>85</sup> Figes, *op. cit.* p. 121

<sup>86</sup> Figes, *op. cit.* p. 116

<sup>87</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 14



Johnson's appropriation of form is presented within the context of a prose novel, prompting some variation: although bearing the name of each speaker and lacking quotation marks, this extract also includes the reporting clause "said", native to dialogue forms in prose narrative. Figs' combination of prose and script forms in 'On Stage', and use of meta-narrative to explore resultant inconsistencies, marks a close correlation between Figs' writing goals and those encouraged by Johnson's and Gordon's New Fiction.

### 1.5.2 Ann Quin

Born in Brighton in 1936, Ann Quin is the author of four novels: *Berg* (1964), *Three* (1966), *Passages* (1969) and *Tripticks* (1972). A fifth novel, *The Unmapped Country*, was left incomplete at the time of her death by drowning in 1973.<sup>89</sup> Deceased a few months prior to Johnson, Quin is represented in *Beyond the Words* by an extract from *The Unmapped Country*, with no accompanying equivalent to the other contributors' critical commentaries save for brief bibliographic information from Gordon and a statement from Marion Boyars, of publisher Calder & Boyars. Gordon was evidently keen to include Quin, pressing in a 1974 letter to Boyars the urgency of receiving accurate biographical details from Quin's publisher, so that she may be included alongside Johnson in the book's dedication:

First, can you tell me the year of Ann Quin's birth. This is for the book's dedication, to her and Bryan Johnson.  
 Second, can you send me up to 250 words of biographical information, listing in particular her publications.  
 Again, I'm afraid this is urgent. Thanks.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Constable, 1964) p. 12 (See 'Note on Referencing' for an explanation of the use of photo-quotations in this thesis)

<sup>89</sup> Quin also produced individual short stories which remain uncollected, including 'Leaving School' (1966), 'Every Cripple Has His Own Way of Walking' (1966), 'Living in the Present' (1968), 'Never Trust a Man Who Bathes with his Fingernails' (1968), 'Motherlogue' (1969), 'Eyes That Watch Behind the Wind' (published in 1975) and 'Ghostworm' (published in 1989).

<sup>90</sup> Giles Gordon, Letter to Marion Boyars 15/03/1974, Box 52, Folder 4, Calder & Boyars mss.



Perhaps even more significantly, Gordon indicates his original intention to borrow a phrase from Quin to name his book, which further indicates the importance of her inclusion:

Thanks for your letter of 8 March (received only second post today!) regarding Ann Quin's contribution to my Hutchinson anthology, incidentally to be called Spaces between words, a phrase of Ann's which will be credited to her.<sup>91</sup>

Gordon was intent on featuring Quin prominently in his anthology, affording her a dedication, a contribution on the same terms as those living authors who participated in the project and, initially, the very title of the text itself, despite the impossibility of her critical contribution.

Owing to Quin's posthumous inclusion in *Beyond the Words*, justification for Quin's prominence within The New Fiction – and Figes' group of four at its centre – must be drawn from elsewhere. Quin's published interviews indicate correlation between her writing approaches and those encouraged by Johnson, Gordon, and indeed Figes. Quin comments on the writing of *Berg* in Nell Dunn's *Talking to Women* (1965):

I think a lot of it comes from inhibitions and verbally we can't really communicate. I find the greatest communication I ever have with certain people is almost a sort of unspoken recognition, where one is not necessarily trying to grope verbally for some contact but you have it there and you recognise it and from then on it's a marvellous mutual expression.<sup>92</sup>

Quin outlines her interest in non-verbal communication, a prevalent feature of her debut novel *Berg* and an early indicator of the formal and linguistic devices she would develop. In an interview with John Hall, Quin describes the influence of drugs on her writing:

If I'd stayed in England and not taken drugs, it would have taken me ten to 15 years to reach the particular stage that I reached then. Peyote verified and made concrete things I'd thought about, and made fantasies more real. It made an outer reality, and outer landscape seem equivalent to an inner landscape. It seemed to make all things possible. I just found that when I did write, it all seemed to tie up.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Giles Gordon, Letter to Marion Boyars 14/03/1974, Box 52, Folder 4, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>92</sup> Ann Quin, in Nell Dunn, *Talking to Women* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965) p. 132

<sup>93</sup> Ann Quin, in John Hall, 'Landscape with Three-Cornered Dances' para. 9 of 18 in: *The Guardian* (29/04/1972) p. 8

Quin expands upon this experience in the development of her work, describing movements between inner and outer landscapes and realities which she “ties up” within her writing. During the same interview, Quin also describes her bisexuality as influential on her creative methods, comparing her use of three-form structures to her own relationships:

I introduced a boy friend of mind to a girlfriend of mine, and they both knew this was one of my fantasies, so we explored it together. It was important to my writing in that it extended the fantasy.<sup>94</sup>

Quin explores triangular relationships throughout her body of work – between Alastair, Judith and Nathaniel in *Berg*, Ruth, Leonard and ‘S’ in *Three* and three unnamed characters, one male, one female, and one missing altogether in *Passages*. The interview reveals a distinct characteristic of Quin’s writing, recalling Johnson’s insistence on “the explication of thought”.<sup>95</sup> Quin also compares closely to Johnson in her response to criticism, expressing frustration at a lack of emphasis on the technicality of her writing as she questions “when reviewers will be more concerned in telling what a book is and not just what it’s about”.<sup>96</sup>

The short fiction selected to represent Quin in *Beyond the Words* is afforded specific praise by Gordon during his introduction, as he states that “judging by the opening chapter printed here, it could have been her most considerable work”.<sup>97</sup> Quin’s contribution demonstrates many common characteristics of her work, using multiple written forms and blurring distinctions between fantasies and monologues, actions and dialogue:

Dr X. No, wait, you tell me. I’ve got the pen here. Do you see the pen?  
S. No, I don’t see it.  
I see an endless road, white-glittering under the sun’s rays, glittering like a needle; above the remorseless sun weighing down the trees and houses under its electric rays. How can I explain, describe that to them? They would never understand. How ridiculous he looked holding that pen, nodding, grinning up at the other doctor. What a relief to get away from them and hear a newly arrived patient exclaim ‘I am St Michael the Archangel and the Red Horse of the Apocalypse.’<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Quin, in Hall *op. cit.* para. 13-4 of 18

<sup>95</sup> Quin is selected for specific attention in Chapter 4, which includes close readings from a selection of her work using the critical arguments of the New Fiction.

<sup>96</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to Marion Boyars 8/6/1966, Box 52, Folder 2, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>97</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ p. 11

<sup>98</sup> Ann Quin, ‘From ‘The Unmapped Country’: An Unfinished Novel’ p. 265 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 252-74

Quin, like Johnson and Figes, uses a modification of a playscript form to signify each speaker alongside devices more typical of prose such as internal monologue. Quin's inclination to combine and reinvent forms in this way is a characteristic of the text as a whole, seemingly emphasising artificiality in some places, whilst other sections take a distinct prose form dense with the mimetic devices familiar to readers of Johnson or Figes:

The Red Queen breathing through the tunnel. Her face at the bottom of the lavatory, grinned up. Flush her away. Sandra sat for some time in the lavatory, the only place she could be by herself and not be distracted, and go back over the journey; even so their voices interrupted 'It's all in the head you must realize that – in the head in the head inthehead inthehead inthehead...' and she saw the doctor's faceless presence behind his desk, like the painting 'Le Principe du plaisir', by Magritte, except the figure in the painting was infinitely better, more pleasing.<sup>99</sup>

Quin's prose is fragmentary and repetitious, mixing tenses and narrative voices, laden with interruptions of interior voices "in the head", or linguistic games like the tracing of "plaisir" through "pleasing" in comparing a vision of the doctor across other media in the form of Magritte's painting. With the combination of forms demonstrated in these extracts, Quin's inclusion in *Beyond the Words* represents the exploratory approach to developing new writing models which The New Fiction encourages.<sup>100</sup> In addition, Quin's selection of subject matter sits in line with those encouraged by Johnson: the inside of one's own mind, and a solipsistic experience of the world.

### 1.5.3 Alan Burns

During the loose fifteen-year period covered by *Beyond the Words*, Burns published six novels: *Buster* (1961), *Europe After the Rain* (1965), *Celebrations* (1967), *Babel* (1969), *Dreamerika!* (1972) and *The Angry Brigade* (1973).<sup>101</sup> Burns' contribution to *Beyond the Words* is a short story titled 'Wonderland', and a critical exposition of his writing titled 'Essay'. Whilst Figes' 'Note' contains a range of critical similarities to Johnson and Gordon, Burns' convergences with the broader New Fiction ethos are predominantly methodological.

<sup>99</sup> Quin, *op. cit.* p. 255

<sup>100</sup> Quin's writing is discussed in more detail throughout Chapter 4 of this thesis.

<sup>101</sup> Burns published two more novels, *The Day Daddy Died* (1981) and *Revolutions of the Night* (1986), as well as works of non-fiction including *To Deprave and Corrupt: Technical Reports of the United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (1972) and *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods* (1981).

Considering Johnson's and Gordon's call for an awareness of other media, it is noteworthy that Burns describes the development of his early writing methods in relation to photography:

I saw a photograph in a shop window, of a man and woman kissing. It recalled the relationship between my mother and father and between them and me, which I had tried to define but had been defeated by its complexity. I solved the problem simply, by describing the photograph, the image. This was the key to my being able to write my first book, *Buster*. Using my memory intensely, I found I could review my life in pictures and describe them in sequence.<sup>102</sup>

Rather like *Aren't You Rather Young?*, Burns' essay moves between his novels, describing the evolution of his technique in each. Burns describes himself to be, after *Buster*, "considering the question of connection and flirting with the notion of disconnection".<sup>103</sup> Of his second novel, *Europe After the Rain*, Burns describes a union of experience and chance, identifying in his personal history a "young man killed and a family broken, in a landscape of war and purposeless suffering" contrasted against three matters of happenstance which provoked the writing of this book:

I saw the Max Ernst painting of the title, at the Tate. In a second-hand bookshop in Lyme Regis I found the verbatim record of the Nuremberg trials, and in another shop in Axminster I bought a journalist's report on life in Poland after the war. This last provided most of my background material. I had this badly written guide-book on my desk and I typed from it in a semi-trance. My eyes glazed and in the blue only the sharpest and strongest words, mainly nouns, emerged. I picked them out and wrote them down and made my own sense of them later [...] Painters often screw up their eyes when looking at a landscape so that in the blur they catch the essence.<sup>104</sup>

Through his discussion, Burns presents his drawing of influence from a range of sources and disciplines. Photography, painting, history, documentary and a Surrealist imposition of methodological restrictions each have a part to play in Burns' writing practice.

In his own interview for *The Imagination on Trial*, Burns expands upon the comments made in 'Essay' and offers further insight into his working methods:

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<sup>102</sup> Alan Burns, 'Essay' pp. 63-4 In: Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 63-8

<sup>103</sup> Burns, *op. cit.* p. 64

<sup>104</sup> Burns, *op. cit.* p. 65

I typed, forgetting what I was about, that I was writing a novel, blocking out... as much of the rational mind as I could. I picked out images, not always the most startling, not worrying about connections, just batting away for a week or two. Of course the result derived partly from a conscious decision: I spotted the book and saw how to use it... And of course the raw material was transformed, re-worked through a number of drafts.<sup>105</sup>

Whilst Burns' comments in *The Imagination on Trial* are largely reiterative of those in *Beyond the Words*, this text strengthens associations between he, Johnson and Figes, who are also interviewed therein. Johnson outlines similar ideas about conscious and subconscious selectivity from a body of raw material:

The book has an inner consistency which I don't remember putting there consciously. I don't know how the book happened. I just know it's right. The subconscious of the mind, all the myriad impressions one's ever had, is like a vast sea and this little net dives down and pulls things up at random.<sup>106</sup>

There are clear comparisons to be made between Johnson's manner of devising form and subject matter for his books, and Burns' attempts to "block out" rationality in his own selection processes. Sustaining the Figes comparison, Burns continues to reference the visual arts, citing painting and photography as key influences on his methodological development,<sup>107</sup> similarly demonstrating the combination of literature and other media.

Much of Burns' writing during this period can be characterised by his representation of the State, using narrative and form as metaphor for the confines of social order. Burns describes his first novel, *Celebrations*, to be an assembly of "heavy public rituals: marriages, funerals, wakes, steadily growing grander until they tipped over into absurdity",<sup>108</sup> and his second, *Babel* as follows:

It was about the power of the State. How in every street, every room, every shop, every workplace, every school, every institution, and particularly in every family, the essential pattern of power relations is dictated by the underlying rules, assumptions and moral principles of the State.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Alan Burns, 'Alan Burns' p. 166, In: Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (eds.), *The Imagination on Trial* pp. 161-8

<sup>106</sup> B.S. Johnson, 'B.S. Johnson', p. 87, In: Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial* pp. 83-94

<sup>107</sup> Alan Burns, 'Alan Burns' p. 163

<sup>108</sup> Alan Burns, 'Essay' p. 66

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

It is along similar lines that Burns describes his creative contribution to *Beyond the Words*, describing his short story 'Wonderland' as a fusion of "factory, hospital and work-camp into an all-purpose institution to represent the power of the State".<sup>110</sup> Burns' intention here is clear, the main body of his story constituting a first-person monologue which moves through an abusive marriage, run-ins with the law and troubling experiences in the multi-purpose institution described.

Early stages of Burns' story set the narrator's experiences against the Goddess of Love mythology, an introductory quotation stating that "Ancient roman mythology tells us that Venus, the original Goddess of Love, floated in from the ocean on a huge sea shell",<sup>111</sup> shortly followed by the narrator: "I worked as a builder in those high rise flats where you can earn a tremendous amount of money".<sup>112</sup> These images are further juxtaposed against the statement that "Hollywood mythology tells us that a modern Goddess of Love rode into Beverly Hills pedalling a lavender bicycle, dressed in tight-fitting lavender pedal-pushers and a tight-fitting lavender sweater".<sup>113</sup> Towards the later stages, the aftermath of the protagonist's attempted suicide is interrupted by the arrival of Kim Novak on the Hollywood scene:

I was too sad to say goodbye. I'd got to know them. There'd been no conversation in the way people sit and talk about the weather, we'd none of that.

With his fatherly advice, Harry Cohn lifted the blonde to the pedestal left vacant by Rita Hayworth, and the publicity department began informing the unsuspecting world that Kim Novak, Goddess of Love, had arrived in Wonderland.

People keep in touch tremendously well with each other and with the camp. If you go down there they'll always tell you, someone's got a card from someone.<sup>114</sup>

Set apart from the main body of text in a smaller typeface, these extracts offer snippets of Novak's ascension to Hollywood stardom as opposed to Burns' protagonist's steady decline. Burns paints an image of the State as a gargantuan machine that consumes, controls and homogenizes, through a protagonist whose experiences of relationships, fatherhood,

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<sup>110</sup> Burns, *op. cit.* p. 68

<sup>111</sup> Burns, *op. cit.* p. 69

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Burns, *op. cit.* p. 85

justice, employment and healthcare are rendered indistinguishable in their uniform presentation. In the extract above, it is unclear whether he has left his family or his job, been released from hospital or prison. Burns sustains these ambiguities through the contrasting imagery borrowed from Charles E. Fritch's *Kim Novak, Goddess of Love*, presenting the Hollywood starlet as similarly artificial; Novak is most commonly simply "the blonde" or the apocryphal "Goddess of Love". Burns' use of form to marry these elements together confirms the strength of his inclusion in Johnson's and Gordon's New Fiction, demonstrating an idiosyncratic combination of form and subject matter.

Although Figs, Quin and Burns are, as Figs suggests, the most closely aligned with Johnson, the other writers from Gordon's selected eleven provide additional supporting evidence for a view of The New Fiction as a sizable and varied writing group. The remainder of this chapter examines the connections drawn between the critical foundations of The New Fiction and the authors presented under its name in Gordon's *Beyond the Words*.

#### 1.5.4 Amongst Those Left

The remaining six writers selected for *Beyond the Words* hold a close alignment with the broad critical project that Johnson and Gordon establish. Anthony Burgess is selected "as a kind of father figure",<sup>115</sup> a prolific elder statesman of innovative writing in Britain at this time who authored seventeen novels during the outlined fifteen-year period, most notably including 1962's *A Clockwork Orange* and three parts of the *Enderby* series.<sup>116</sup> In *Beyond the Words*, Burgess' 'Foreword' declares his regard for Johnson and Quin, stating the following:

I greatly admired the books of B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin – not only for their willingness to try new things but also for their firmly traditional virtues. Both writers knew how to create character, to present a recognizably real world, to develop plot, to probe human motivation.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Giles Gordon, *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?* p. 155

<sup>116</sup> Between 1960 and 1975, Burgess authored the novels *The Right to an Answer* (1960), *The Doctor is Sick* (1960), *The Worm and the Ring* (1960), *Devil of a State* (1961), *One Hand Clapping* (1961, under the pseudonym Joseph Kell), *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), *The Wanting Seed* (1962), *Honey for the Bears* (1963), *Inside Mr. Enderby* (1963), *The Eve of St. Venus* (1964), *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love Life* (1964), *A Vision of Battlements* (1965), *Tremor of Intent: An Eschatological Spy Novel* (1966), *Enderby Outside* (1968), *M/F* (1971), *Napoleon Symphony: A Novel in Four Movements* (1974) and *The Clockwork Testament, or Enderby's End* (1974).

<sup>117</sup> Anthony Burgess, 'Foreword' p. 19 In: Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 18-21

Favouring both authors' drive for innovation, whilst retaining the familiar and the novelistic, Burgess also mirrors Johnson's and Gordon's views on the experimental. Burgess situates Johnson along a trajectory beginning from Sterne, stating that "Laurence Sterne was a great avant-garde writer, and Johnson was one of the few modern novelists prepared to learn from him".<sup>118</sup> Within this context, Burgess further declares that "I have never regarded myself as an experimental writer",<sup>119</sup> attributing such to his own reliance upon "received notions of plot, character, dialogue, diachronic presentation of action and so on".<sup>120</sup> Burgess treads similar ground to Johnson, and echoes Gordon's claims that "to be a novel" – not experimentation itself – was the ultimate aim of The New Fiction. In this, a relationship to particular literary tradition is reiterated; the unorthodoxy of their writing arguably conceals a close adherence to the more traditional goals of the novel itself.

Robert Nye, author at this time of *Doubtfire* (1967), the short story collection *Tales I Told My Mother* (1969) and collections of poetry including *Juvenalia 1* (1961), *Juvenalia 2* (1963), and *Darker Ends* (1969), demonstrates a similar degree of critical scope to Burgess. He urges a more concise recognition of the identified experimental tradition, stating that "the truth is that we have a *tradition* of 'experimental' writing in English, but this commonly being referred to only as a series of isolated eccentric works the continuity of that tradition is lost".<sup>121</sup> Nye like Johnson identifies critical failures to properly attend innovative works:

That sense may be academically patronized as eccentric, on account of its energy in pursuit of digression and irrelevance, but it is arguable that it presents a more recognizable paradigm of things as they are than do the tame tricks of those writers who never digress for fear that the act might involve them in some truth which they do not want to know, or even perhaps evoke a coherence beyond the irrelevant.<sup>122</sup>

Nye denounces the timidity of writers who fail to "digress" – clearly indicating his belief that deviation from the "tame tricks" of the existing mainstream represented a necessary step in evoking what he terms "a recognizable paradigm of things as they are". In a letter to publisher Marion Boyars, Nye elaborates on this notion, describing his representation of

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20

<sup>121</sup> Robert Nye, 'Note' p. 203 In: Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 201-4

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204



schizophrenia in *Doubtfire* as an exercise in mimetics, bemoaning the manner in which this endeavour is obscured by the language of experimentalism:

That book is not 'about' schizophrenia, it IS schizophrenia... and the dividedness, the unreality, the not-being-there (yes, not-Being there) it speaks of and out of, is so surprisingly so tragically common that I think you might be startled as to how many people find it not 'confused' or 'experimental' at all but a pattern of their own life-defeating processes. To me, its writing wasn't ambitious.<sup>123</sup>

Nye recalls Johnson, Gordon and Burgess in asserting a need for new writing models, a break from certain writing traditions, and an escape from a perceived "irrelevance" whilst avoiding some of the accusations of 'confusion' implied by the focus on experimentalism.

Johnson, Gordon, Burgess and Nye outline wide-ranging critical goals, with specific targets in mind to be challenged, but other contributors to *Beyond the Words* focus more inwardly, discussing their own writing motivations and favoured subject matter in isolation. One example is Elspeth Davie, who authored a collection of short stories called *The Spark* (1969), and two novels, *Providings* (1965) and *Creating a Scene* (1971), prior to her inclusion in *Beyond the Words*. Davie indicates her focus on the notion of an author's personal experience as subject matter, alongside the influence of other media:

The writers who chiefly interest me are those who strike in at an angle to experience rather than going along parallel to it. Amongst other things I would say the cinema has been a stimulus to them. [...] The desolating and the unfamiliar is happening continually between our getting up and our going to bed. It is of this day-to-day business of living, its mysteriousness and its absurdity, that I would like to write.<sup>124</sup>

Davie's short critical contribution to *Beyond the Words* emphasises again the consistency of the critical position which Gordon's text, under the influence of Johnson's essay, represents. Davie's notion of "striking it at an angle" recalls Johnson's focus on the idiosyncrasies of personal experience, further emphasised by her evocation of the everyday, and indeed Figes' citation of other media forms as influential on the development of new writing models.

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Nye, Letter to Marion Boyars 13/05/1966, Box 51, Folder 1, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>124</sup> Elspeth Davie, 'Note' p. 88 In: Giles Gordon, *Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 87-8

The importance of a literary focus on day-to-day events is also asserted by Gabriel Josipovici, author at this time of *The Inventory* (1968) and *Words* (1971)<sup>125</sup>. Josipovici's unusual response to Gordon takes the form of a letter, outlining the constraints and formal devices employed in his works, relating them to his juxtaposition of the microcosmic solipsism of everyday experience, and the macrocosmic human experience of mortality:

The formal exploration would itself be an exploration of the relation *in everyday life*, between these two – an exploration ultimately, I suppose, of the relation of the individual to the world into which he is born and in which he must die.<sup>126</sup>

Josipovici, like Figes, relates the invention of new literary forms to the representation of the everyday, and his discussion touches on a range of other similar topics which fall within The New Fiction remit. Josipovici states for example that “most often I have started from the remarks of painters or composers because I find that they tend to put things far better than writers seem able to”,<sup>127</sup> and discusses the need to invent:

I have no capacity for invention, little interest in wrapping whatever I do invent in the required gestures of verisimilitude, and I have no ‘interesting’ experiences. In short, I have nothing to tell and little desire to preach (why should my views on morality or politics be more interesting than anyone else’s?). Yet I am fascinated by the impulse towards invention that wells up in all of us, and I am constantly filled with excitement at the world in which I live.<sup>128</sup>

Both Davie and Josipovici appear comparable to Figes, outlining specific areas of literary focus which recall Figes’ theoretical discussion of everyday experience. Figes states the necessity of devising a new form: “Experience is chaotic and each generation selects certain facets of reality from which to form a model of human experience which looks deceptively

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<sup>125</sup> Josipovici also authored a collection of short stories and drama, *Mobius the Stripper* (1974), and the critical study *The World and the Book* in 1971. He would go on to publish many further works of fiction: *The Present* (1975), *Four Stories* (1977), *Migrations* (1977), *The Echo Chamber* (1979), *The Air We Breathe* (1981), *Conversations in Another Room* (1981), *Contre Jour* (1984), *In the Fertile Land* (1987), *Steps: Selected Fiction and Drama* (1990), *The Big Glass* (1991), *In a Hotel Garden* (1993), *Moo Pak* (1994), *Now* (1998), *Goldberg: Variations* (2002), *Only Joking* (2005), *Everything Passes* (2006), *After and Making Mistakes* (2008) and *Heart’s Wings* (2010). Josipovici’s non-fiction and critical work includes *The Lessons of Modernism* (1977), *Writing and the Body* (1982), *The Mirror of Criticism* (1983), *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (1988), *Text and Voice* (1992), *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion* (1999), *A Life* (2001), *The Singer on the Shore* (2006) and *What Ever Happened to Modernism* (2010).

<sup>126</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, ‘Letter to the Editor’ p. 187 In: Giles Gordon, *Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 183-8

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184

like a totality. It never is".<sup>129</sup> The technical task of presenting the everyday is also clearly at the forefront of Davie and Josipovici's writing at this time, and they are critically supported by Johnson's and Figes' respective discussions.

Other selected writers, rather than demonstrating the selection and practical investigation of specific, external subject matter, opt instead to focus yet more internally. David Plante, who had published *The Ghost of Henry James* (1970), *Slides* (1971), *Relatives* (1972), and *The Darkness of the Body* (1974)<sup>130</sup> prior to his inclusion in the collection, outlines his position in the form of a letter, indicating his inclination to explore "certain states of consciousness, certain vague and inarticulate senses".<sup>131</sup> Unlike the exploration of the everyday espoused by Figes, Nye and Josipovici, Plante's approach bears more in common with the workings of the mind which Johnson encourages, and Quin demonstrates. This comparison is further strengthened by the connections Plante draws between his internal focus and a supposed experimentalism, demonstrating a similar disdain for the term to that exhibited by Johnson, Gordon and Burgess:

I'd find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to write in any other way. Whenever I have tried to write differently – whenever I have tried quite consciously to 'experiment' – the result has always sounded to me forced and fake. You may gather from this that I value some 'natural' or 'true' element in writing. I think I do. Certain writing emanates a sense of *something* which is immediately perceivable and unnecessary to define; some writing sounds false and pretentious.<sup>132</sup>

Plante's focus on the vagaries of conscious states and the senses clearly sits in line with the wider New Fiction project, and his notion of an innate truth – explicitly contradictory to a perceived experimentalism – continues to reflect Johnson.

Maggie Ross, who by 1975 had published the novel *The Gasteropod* (1968) and a range of short stories and television plays, offers a creative response to Gordon, conducting an interview with herself on the subject of authorship:

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<sup>129</sup> Eva Figes, 'Note' p. 113

<sup>130</sup> Plante's later works include *Figures in Bright Air* (1976), *The Family* (1978), *The Country* (1980), *The Woods* (1982), *Difficult Women* (1983), *The Foreigner* (1984), *The Catholic* (1986), *My Mother's Pearl Necklace* (1987), *The Native* (1987), *The Accident* (1991), *Annunciation* (1994), *The Age of Terror* (1999), *American Ghosts* (2005), *ABC* (2007) and *The Pure Lover* (2009).

<sup>131</sup> David Plante, 'Letter to the Editor' p. 233 In: Giles Gordon, *Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 231-3

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* p. 231

*Was it in your terms successful?*

The result seemed complicated, abstruse. I wrote it really striving for clarity. Appealing to the lowest common denominator of understanding, or so I thought, with what I believed to be direct and simple means. My idea of simplicity isn't everybody's.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly to Plante, Ross outlines her communicative goals, seeking a writing which is immediately and universally relatable. For Ross this is, like Plante, achieved not through deliberate experimentation but writing in a loose and naturalistic manner, and both authors describe their adoption of the only comfortable mode of writing they felt possible. Where Plante describes the impossibility of writing "any other way", Ross describes her own unusual prose as follows:

Although at times I've been accused of being dense and unreadable in my writing, it's never been my intention to do so. Given the choice, and the ability, I'd rather be thought of as a writer of infinite clarity. We write in the only way we can.<sup>134</sup>

There are clear comparative lines which can be drawn throughout the entire selection of authors included in *Beyond the Words*, stemming from the combination of Johnson's and Gordon's critical arguments which sit at the core of *The New Fiction*. The identification of subject matter commonly revolves around individual experience, often turning inwards on the author's solipsistic interpretation of the everyday. Many of the selected authors reject the implication that their willingness to adopt unorthodox literary devices constitutes experimentalism, some explicitly rejecting the term itself, and others instead urging a shift of focus to identify a mode of writing which they believe to be naturalistic or mimetic. The body of critical writing from Johnson and Gordon is supported in practice by Gordon's selected writers, demonstrating a more comprehensive critical approach to contemporary writing than has yet been credited.

As with Johnson, Gordon, Quin, Burns and Figes, the further inclusion of Burgess, Davie, Josipovici, Plante, Nye and Ross in *Beyond the Words* constitutes only part of the evidence which suggests a more formal association than has been previously suggested. It is, for example, particularly noteworthy that Davie and Nye were, alongside Quin and Burns, published by Calder & Boyars, and Figes also contributed to the Calder & Boyars catalogue

<sup>133</sup> Maggie Ross, 'Interview' p. 278 In: Giles Gordon, *Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 277-83

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p. 281

as a translator of German texts. John Calder's correspondence with these authors proves particularly illuminating, with one series of letters exchanged with Burns culminating in the suggestion to name a literary movement operating out of the Calder and Boyars stable:

It's difficult to cook up a name for a 'movement' which is still so scattered and unformed: perhaps the naming should succeed rather than precede the birth, though I understand that you see the naming as speeding up that process.

I've not raised the question of whether or not the whole thing's worthwhile (you know as well as I, that the hottest British talent has invariably existed outside all movements (Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence, Beckett, Golding...) because frankly I'm all for you having a bash and seeing what happens.<sup>135</sup>

A stronger example appears in *Like a Fiery Elephant*, where Coe includes a statement from Burns regarding a 1969 event under the name 'Writers Reading'. The Calder & Boyars archive includes a flier for this event, which further clarifies the composition and ambitions of this project, describing it as the launch of "a co-operative of prose writers concerned with new forms, styles, and language" and listing the set of four outlined previously amongst its participants; Burns, Figs, Johnson and Quin were all directly involved in the 'Writers Reading' project.<sup>136</sup> Burns' letters with Calder reveal that at least one further 'Writers Reading' event took place in April 1970.<sup>137</sup> 'Writers Reading' appears to be the initial name given to the group of innovative writers associated via Calder & Boyars, and is itself the first sign of the intentions between them to formally and professionally associate as a literary group. Further evidence of collaboration between many of The New Fiction writers exists throughout the Calder & Boyars archive. Burns and Calder's letters discuss, for example, a symposium taking place in Plymouth on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1967, at which both Burns and Quin spoke,<sup>138</sup> preliminary details for the formation of a new (unnamed) literary magazine involving Calder, Burns, Johnson and Nye,<sup>139</sup> and arrangements for Burns and Quin to appear together on the BBC's *The Third Programme*.<sup>140</sup> Marion Boyars' letters include an invitation to speak alongside Johnson at the New Universities Festival in Canterbury in

<sup>135</sup> Alan Burns, Letter to John Calder 12/05/1965, Box 41, Folder 56, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>136</sup> Flier for 'Writers Reading', 27/11/1969, Box 41, Folder 64, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>137</sup> Alan Burns, Letter to John Calder 19/01/1970, Box 41, Folder 61, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>138</sup> John Calder, Letter to Alan Burns 12/10/1967, Box 41, Folder 58, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>139</sup> John Calder, Letter to Alan Burns 27/02/1969, Box 41, Folder 60, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>140</sup> John Calder, Letter to Alan Burns 14/03/1968, Box 41, Folder 59, Calder & Boyars mss.

1969,<sup>141</sup> and an invitation to the exhibition *Labyrinths: Women and the Arts, Multi-Media* in 1973 which featured fiction by Quin and Johnson's *London Consequences* co-editor Margaret Drabble, non-fiction by Figes, and other submissions from French writers and artists including Nathalie Sarraute, Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras.<sup>142</sup>

Another vital source of information for connections between The New Fiction writers comes in the form of reviews of each others' works. Nye's review article 'Against the Barbarians' for *The Guardian* in 1972 considers both Quin's fourth novel *Tripticks* and Burns' fifth, *Dreamerika!*, stating that "among the names of younger English writers of promise few have seemed more interesting, over the past 10 years, than Ann Quin and Alan Burns".<sup>143</sup> In summarising each author's respective bodies of work, however, Nye expresses frustration, accusing Quin's *Passages* of getting lost in "private masochistic fantasies too rigorously explored"<sup>144</sup> and Burns' *Babel* of presenting "something more public and accessible, boring indeed",<sup>145</sup> compared to his previous works. Nye even levels an accusation of superficial experimentalism at Quin, stating the following:

It can still be hoped that Miss Quin will chuck the box of tricks away and sit down one day to write a whole book in which observation of the heart's affections is permitted to predominate and inform. At the moment, in "*Tripticks*", she seems to me to be engaged in a process of avoiding the implications of her own imagination.<sup>146</sup>

Nye's criticism of Quin supports the critical position attributed to him through his association with The New Fiction; the internalised subject matter and avoidance of overcomplicated trickery are clearly important factors in his reading of Quin.

Other Nye reviews indicate his admiration for Quin's technical skill, his earlier review of Quin's second novel *Three* describing her to be "the most naturally and delicately gifted writer of her generation",<sup>147</sup> but in the case of *Tripticks* he expresses disappointment in its apparent gimmicky. In this, however, there is evidence of dialogue taking place, a later

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<sup>141</sup> Letter: Pauline B. Wright to Marion Boyars 06/06/1969, Box 28, Folder '1969 June 6-10', Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>142</sup> Letter: Stephanie Mathews to Marion Boyars (undated), Box 36, Folder '1973 Jan 1-11', Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Nye, 'Against the Barbarians' In: *The Guardian* 27/04/1972

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Robert Nye, 'Three into two goes Quin' In: *The Scotsman* 28/05/1966

letter between Quin and Boyars indicating the sincerity with which she took Nye's criticism, allowing it to inform her subsequent writing:

Am also well into another book – another journey of discovery/rediscovery and taking Robert Nye's criticism seriously: writing/dealing with 'matters of the heart' – thou [sic] I can hear your criticism as well coming in 'much too personal...' Ah well!<sup>148</sup>

Nye's criticism of Burns is similar in nature, arguing that "the slickness of the author's manipulation of the cut-up method fills the scene completely",<sup>149</sup> making a similar accusation of gimmickry and style over substance. Indeed Nye goes on to suggest that Burns "throw away the scissors he has borrowed from Mr. Burroughs", criticising Burns' methodology as derivative of American innovator William Burroughs. Burns would, in *The Imagination on Trial*, come to accept Nye's comparison, but continue to refute the accusation of borrowing: "I also use Burroughs's cut-up technique which I insist I invented because I used it before I'd heard of Burroughs".<sup>150</sup> The development and application of new writing forms amongst New Fiction writers is clearly not without its controversy, but there is evident dialogue between them which discusses this process, supporting the notion of a self-referential and self-supporting group of writers rather than a loose and retroactive affiliation of individuals.

## 1.6 Summary

Burns' comments to Calder in 1965 appear to have proven accurate – the 'Writers Reading' project was indeed short-lived, but the suggestion that "the naming should succeed rather than precede the birth" lends weight to Gordon's subsequent naming in 1975. A range of events taking place throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrate the ongoing collaboration between several of these writers, and published review articles demonstrate the range of critical dialogue taking place. Johnson's central position amongst an active and vibrant community of innovative writers serves as a vital contrast to the image of him as a "one-man avant-garde", and demonstrates the significant roles played by a group of writers either unknown or dismissed as less significant. From a position of retrospect, and heavily influenced by Johnson, Gordon's *Beyond the Words* must be viewed as a conscious attempt

<sup>148</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to Marion Boyars 16/01/1973, Box 52, Folder 3, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>149</sup> Robert Nye, 'Against the Barbarians'

<sup>150</sup> Alan Burns, 'Alan Burns' p. 166

to formally and publicly unify these writers, declaring them to be “in search of a New Fiction”. This attempt arguably failed. Figs’ comments on the deaths of Johnson and Quin, and the emigration of Burns to America, confirm the end of such a group before it had a chance to fully form itself. The New Fiction nevertheless provides context in which Johnson’s criticism may be examined, in respect of the writing and further criticism which it influenced. The value of this context becomes clear when further expanding this view to consider the positioning of this New Fiction in relation to the broader literary field; the broadening of Johnson’s critical context does not end with this small and short-lived writing community.



## Chapter 2: A New Realism, and The New Fiction in Context

### 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced The New Fiction, outlining its core principles and indicating the sympathies expressed by its various members. This chapter situates The New Fiction within a broader literary history, offering three contextual examinations. The first explores the manner in which Johnson positions his writing – and by extension the new writing that he and Gordon encourage – as distinctly post-Joycean, outlining the relationship the New Fiction has with its modernist predecessors. In particular, attention is drawn to the deliberate breaks from long-established traditions to seek a more effective way of capturing reality. Refuting the primacy of the nineteenth century brand of literary realism, and declaring the ineffectuality of linear, ‘what-happens-next’ storytelling, The New Fiction outlines their own model of realistic writing. In doing so, Gordon’s and Johnson’s group converges with modernism, pairing a radical re-evaluation of traditional forms and models with rigorous attention to the experience of modern humankind. The second examination addresses complaints raised by New Fiction writers about existing models of narrative fiction which failed to make such developments upon modernism, and in particular, the realist tradition continually held over from the nineteenth century. Here, the New Fiction is placed at odds with major movements in mainstream British literature, clarifying their claims of failure, ignorance, and the necessity for a new writing. Keen to employ modernist strategies to reinvigorate the novel, The New Fiction is met with a domestic climate unwilling to break from tradition, or to engage with the fine-tuned unorthodoxy and foreign influences exhibited by modernism. The third examination thus moves outside the British mainstream to identify international similarities, particularly on the subjects of realism and literary experimentation. Clear comparisons exist between The New Fiction and a loose association of writers in France known as the *Nouveau Roman*, most prominently including Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. Calder & Boyars were responsible for the first English-language publications in Britain of Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute and their contemporaries, and there is evidence, presented here, to suggest that John Calder intended the group of writers gathered under his imprint to constitute a British equivalent to these French innovators. By way of comparison, The New Fiction and the *Nouveau Roman* are examined

as confluences of serious, ambitious, and critically astute writers, contributing to a sustained effort to challenge and reinvent the 'realistic' novel.

## 2.2 The New Fiction and Modernism

As indicated in Chapter One of this thesis, Gordon's mistrust of the accepted terminologies of realism ("where has 'being realistic' got the present decade? Where has 'social realism' got this century?"<sup>1</sup>) is largely distilled from Johnson's discussion of realism in *Aren't You Rather Young*, wherein Johnson denounces the nineteenth century narrative novel as an "exhausted form"<sup>2</sup> which fails to "legitimately or successfully embody present-day reality".<sup>3</sup> In Gordon's *Beyond the Words*, Eva Figes goes further still, asserting the realist novel to be "a downright lie".<sup>4</sup> Such challenges reveal conflict between the mainstream understanding of literary realism and the realistic writing demanded by The New Fiction. The goal was a novel which told individual, experiential truth, exploiting the multimedia climate to borrow, combine and create tailored writing forms for a modern world. Although this understanding of the realistic is at odds with the mainstream of realist writing at this time, it reinforces claims made by Johnson that James Joyce's literary innovations provide a "starting point"<sup>5</sup> to create a novel which reflects an ever-changing world. Johnson firmly believes in the novel as "an evolving form, not a static one",<sup>6</sup> and connects this belief to his admiration for Joyce. For similar reasons, Johnson also declares Samuel Beckett to be "the man I believe most worth reading and listening to",<sup>7</sup> and draws from Beckett the impetus to explore the notion that "change is a condition of life ... one should perhaps embrace change as all there is".<sup>8</sup> Thus, the modernist aesthetic of representing modern life as it is lived, subjectively and individualistically, provides a blueprint for the novel's continued development. Whilst Johnson traces the history of his own literary aesthetic from Joyce and Beckett back to Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (c. 1759-67), it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p.9

In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975) pp. 9-15

<sup>2</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) p. 16

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Eva Figes, 'B.S. Johnson' p. 71 In: *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1985 pp. 70-1

<sup>5</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* p. 13

<sup>6</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* pp. 12-3

<sup>7</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 17

<sup>8</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Ibid.*

early twentieth century proliferation of new forms and media that had utmost influence over Johnson, and over Gordon's subsequent project in *Beyond the Words*.

As noted previously in this chapter, Johnson's admiration for James Joyce is made evident throughout the early pages of his introduction, from the opening comments regarding cinema to the identification of Joyce as "the Einstein of the novel".<sup>9</sup> Davies' criticism acknowledges the importance of Modernism's legacy in informing the reading of Johnson, using precisely this context to outline the 'terrain' which Johnson's writing explores. Johnson positions Joyce as a central figure in his understanding of the novel, and makes a clear statement of intent to employ modernist strategies in order to combat what he perceived as a retrogressive literary climate. Whilst the example of Joyce's engagement with film provides a demonstrable point of comparison for Johnson's own expressed views on print's relationship to the screen, there are more general observations regarding the novel which can also be drawn therefrom. Johnson's view of Joyce as an innovator is, for example, expanded upon when describing Joyce's *Ulysses*:

His subject-matter in *Ulysses* was available to anyone, the events of one day in one place; but by means of form, style and technique in language he made it into something very much more, a novel, not a story about anything. What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen to the reader.<sup>10</sup>

Johnson's rejection of storytelling as a principal function of the novel loses some of its apparent flippancy when framed by his commentary on Joyce. This particular extract illuminates how Johnson draws such a stark division between the novel and the story. Johnson clearly favours the de-prioritisation of 'what happens', of being a 'story about something', and praises Joyce's emphasis on the medium itself. The novel, Johnson argues, becomes more definitively 'novel' when it employs form, style, and technique to such a degree that the manner of its telling far outweighs the matter. Nicolas Tredell describes Johnson's position here in *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson*:

Joyce's *Ulysses* had 'changed everything', but the new-Dickensian novel was still being written [...] The reason that the novel must evolve was in order to come closer to truth, to reality – and

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<sup>9</sup> B.S. Johnson, 'Introduction' p. 12

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

twentieth-century reality, Johnson claimed, is very different from nineteenth-century reality; it is chaotic, fragmented, without apparent pattern or order.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson's intent for the novel appears not a dramatic upheaval, abandoning the old order entirely, but instead a measured combination of established novelistic goals with the devices and methodologies learned from modernism. To reiterate an argument borrowed from Viktor Shlovsky, Johnson's employment of unorthodox devices is not designed to exaggerate form at the exclusion of content, but to achieve harmony between the two: a novel which simultaneously and self-consciously communicates the real as a work of narrative, and occupies the real as an artefact. No specific style is the goal – and as Johnson states, form is not an end in and of itself – but rather the creation of literary works which employ form to pursue this harmony. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane describe, “the search for a style and a typology becomes a self-conscious element in the Modernist's literary production; he is perpetually engaged in a profound and ceaseless journey through the means and integrity of art [...] Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense.”<sup>12</sup> As Glyn White and Philip Tew suggest in their introduction to *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson*, “awkward as ever, Johnson was in some danger of being forgotten as a postmodernist who wasn't post-modern, and a realist who had rejected (conventional) realism”.<sup>13</sup> By engaging in precisely such a practice, Johnson appears exemplary of a noted division between modernism and, specifically, traditional nineteenth-century realist writing. White summarises “an opposition in critical perception between modernist texts (with the possible awareness of the book as a printed medium) and realist texts (which did not exhibit this awareness)”,<sup>14</sup> and Johnson appears to close the gap between these two positions. Johnson's position in relation to modernism is similarly described by David James, who argues that “Johnson fruitfully complicates the story of where modernism went next after mid-century”.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, James goes to explain that Johnson's writing occupies that post-Joycean territory which Johnson himself alludes to, a

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* p. 21 (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism* p. 29 (London: Penguin, 1976)

<sup>13</sup> Glyn White and Philip Tew, 'Introduction' p. 6 In: Glyn White and Philip Tew (eds.), *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* pp. 3-13 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> David James, 'B.S. Johnson Within the Ambit of Modernism' p. 39 In: *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* (4.1/4.2, 2011) pp. 37-53

borrowing of methodology and priorities therefrom with a view not to replicate, but do develop productively upon modernism:

Giving primacy to articulation over content may strike us as an unequivocally high modernist statement. But Johnson was hardly turning away from the reader into the enclosure of self-satisfying experimentalism. Indeed, apart from abhorring the label 'experimental', he saw nothing contradictory in exercising formal priorities precisely in order to sustain that 'nearness', that immersive proximity, between an attentive reader and the subject of any given scene [...] Johnson's objective, therefore, was not to restore the novel's aesthetic autonomy by condoning some version of high-modernist formalism [...] in offering a particular, though by no means unique, response of modernism's afterlife, he greets literary heritage with a gesture of revivification that compels us to wonder whether in fact modernism lives on.

Johnson's – or indeed Joyce's – rejection of nineteenth century realism does not constitute a purely experimental focus on form and medium, but a reconfiguration of literary realism based on the 'awareness' which White outlines. Shlovsky's argument that the artifice of the device actually reinforces the real appears again relevant, and for Johnson, the modernism of Joyce supplies key examples for just such an approach. Post-millennial critics such as James evidently provide some resolution to the issue of contextualising Johnson in relation to modernism in a manner scarcely addressed in older criticism. In doing so, they situate Johnson more directly upon a clear critical trajectory, avoiding the 'outlier' status seemingly granted by the 'experimental' label.

Another crucial aspect of Johnson's reading of *Ulysses* is his emphasis on Joyce's selection of subject matter, being a topic "available to anyone". The deliberate focus on the everyday appears, in Johnson's understanding, to be itself an act of diminishing the importance of that which happens in a story, providing opportunity to emphasise the unique applications of style and technique employed by the author. The combined reading of Johnson's criticism and that in Gordon's *Beyond the Words* reveals that this can be similarly expanded, considering other writers of the New Fiction stable. In broad terms, the justification of the selected subject matter is of clear importance to others included in Gordon's anthology; Eva Figes emphasises the necessity of the everyday, whilst Robert Nye

urges the representation of the individual, subjective experience.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, the reading of the formal device and linguistic technique, upon which Johnson demanded such focus, bears clear relationships with modernist strategies. Where critics such as Bradbury and McFarlane identify modernism as “the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos”,<sup>17</sup> writers such as Johnson, Quin, Figs, Burns, and their New Fiction contemporaries make clearly-identifiable efforts to continue such a practice. Robert Buckeye’s biography of Quin, for instance, acknowledges as such:

She had to break down, disrupt, dissolve. Writing becomes interruption, rupture, dissociation. Although Quin may retain narrative, increasingly it becomes vestigial, as if it were an afterthought. The ostensible search in her fiction is less passage than obsession, less progress than movement, however that can be characterized. Her novels are nonlinear, elliptical, associative; a coherence of fragments (marginalia, journals, illustrations) alongside interrupted and uncompleted narrative, sketchy character, uneven tone.

Her language is often as spare as a Beckett stage [...] at times, her writing may seem to be nothing more than stream-of-consciousness, particularly in her practice to elide the distinction between something inside someone’s mind and that outside it.<sup>18</sup>

Johnson himself invites a reading of Joyce’s modernism as vital context within which his writing operates. When considering the broader New Fiction group, however, it is crucial that this invitation is not extended by Johnson alone. Writing in 1967, eight years before his inclusion in Gordon’s anthology and six before Johnson’s introduction, Anthony Burgess describes Joyce as “a major prophet [...] a modern novelist who has equipped our minds with the words and symbols we need to understand the contemporary world”,<sup>19</sup> and goes on to state the enormity of Joyce’s influence:

Joyce not only initiates a fresh approach to the form but himself realizes its potentialities. He is the pioneer, but he is also the pastmaster. All that his successors have been able to do is to chew on fragments crumbled from the gigantic cake. But Joyce has sanctified experiment, as well as brought [...] integrity and dignity to the

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 1

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, “The Name and Nature of Modernism” p. 27 In: Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism 1890-1930* pp. 19-55 (London: Penguin, 1976)

<sup>18</sup> Robert Buckeye, *Re: Quin* pp. 38-9

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Student’s Guide to Contemporary Fiction* p. 23 (London: Faber & Faber, 1967)

novelist's vocation, and present-day writers must always be aware of working in his shadow.<sup>20</sup>

Two key points emerge from Burgess' statement here: that successors to Joyce are yet to formulate an adequate response to the grand scale of his reinvention of the novel, and that the processes of experimentation and innovation have been thrust to the fore as crucial elements of modern novelistic practice which must not be ignored. Another writer from Gordon's stable, Gabriel Josipovici, also argues similarly to Johnson that modernism continued to hold a vital role into the latter twentieth century:

I want to argue that the lessons of that revolution, correctly understood, have a relevance [...] to the arts of the present day [...] Rightly understood, I said, and unfortunately Modernism has not, in the English-speaking world at any rate, been rightly understood. For too long it has been seen as a revolution in the diction of poetry and nothing more.<sup>21</sup>

Where Johnson sees overlooked invention, and wilful ignorance of modernism's formal and ideological progress in the writing of novels, Josipovici sees a literary revolution that has been misunderstood. It is, like Johnson, the traditional nineteenth-century realist novel which Josipovici accuses, and it is modernism which provides a productive response:

When I say the traditional novel I mean the kind of fiction which emerged in England in the eighteenth century with Defoe, and which persists today in the work of such writers as Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis. The prime allegiance of this form is to verisimilitude: the author enters into a silent agreement with his reader to create a world which will give the illusion of being 'real life'. A world where people will be either guilty or not guilty but never both, where hands will be either delicate or weak, but never both [...] our decisions that hands or events or people are one thing or another is really a convenience rather than a reality – it simply allows us to get on with things, with the business of living. But living to what purpose? That, of course, is the question of the moderns.<sup>22</sup>

Though frequently viewed in isolation as anomalous and avant-gardist, Johnson's views are clearly supported by both Josipovici and Burgess. Other members of the group, such as Quin,

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<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 26

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, 'The Lessons of Modernism' p. 111 In: Gabriel Josipovici, *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays*, pp. 109-23 (London: Macmillan, 1977)

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 111

offer far less by way of direct critical commentary, but are nevertheless attributed with similar ideals. Buckeye states that “if establishment Anglo novels continued to dominate critical attention, there were writers like Quin whose books escaped, challenged, or ignored tradition”.<sup>23</sup> The citation of modernism as a key motivating factor behind the desire for a new approach to the novel provides contextual weight for such claims, clearly framing and positioning *The New Fiction* in relation thereto. It also clearly reinforces links between the more critically vocal members of the group, with similar contextual references employed, and similar strategies encouraged as a result.

In *The Realist Novel* (2010) Richard Allen and Dennis Walder examine the form of the novel in relation to realism, with particular focus on writers who would challenge its conventions. Virginia Woolf is cited as a key example who presents a “major challenge [...] to the existing conventions of realism”,<sup>24</sup> and the marriage between form and narrative appears crucial; “Woolf took a key role in formulating the charges against not only ways of writing but also the ways of looking at the world that they embodied”.<sup>25</sup> Models of writing and models of examining the real world appear to go hand-in-hand. Allen and Walder go on to characterize Joyce to Woolf as a writer who does not reject realism, but revives it:

It would be difficult to describe Woolf’s writing as ‘realistic’ in terms of the realism we find in the earlier novels. Woolf sees no need to spell out exactly what is happening [...] small, simple detail can carry just as much weight as an extended catalogue of descriptions, so creating indeed a revived kind of realism.

A similar effect can be felt in parts of *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of a ‘revived realism’ is a suitable label to apply to the New Fiction’s literary goals. Gabriel Josipovici is again instructive in clarifying this point, highlighting through Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* a realism in which a traditionalist notion of mimesis is impossible, but suggestive, fragmentary truths recreate individualistic experience common to author and reader:

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Buckeye, *Re: Quin* p. 5 (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013)

<sup>24</sup> Richard Allen and Dennis Walder, ‘Can Realist Novels Survive?’ p. 193 In: Dennis Walder (ed.), *The Realist Novel* pp. 191-203 (New York: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Richard Allen and Dennis Walder, ‘Can Realist Novels Survive?’ p. 195 In: Dennis Walder (ed.), *The Realist Novel* pp. 191-203 (New York: Routledge, 2010)



We are forced out of our comfortable, rational, conscious 'set' and forced to recognise that the world never conforms to our picture of it, and that by imagining that it does we conceal the truth from ourselves.

One could go on multiplying examples. Think of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which, again, moved towards the point of understanding, making us realise that this can never be described, only made, encompassed by the creative imagination of the artist and the recreative imagination of the reader. The 'meaning' of the book lies in that final brushstroke of Lily Briscoe's: 'It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.' She has had her vision, as has the reader, but it is not something that can be removed from the entity of the work we have been reading. In a sense, *that* is the vision – something which the work can never *say*, but only point to.<sup>27</sup>

Through Johnson, Shlovsky's critical observations of the novel and the real appear to hold a strong presence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Allen and Walder go on to describe Joyce's and Woolf's writing as "critiques of contemporary conventions of realism [which] remain powerful to this day".<sup>28</sup> Johnson again appears to be exemplary of this 'powerful' influence, and the same is recognised by his New Fiction peers, like Burgess or Josipovici. Crucially, the bold statements of *Aren't You Rather Young* are strengthened by such association; they are freed from some of the insular, aberrant qualities which appear symptomatic of the isolation with which Johnson's criticism is – perhaps inaccurately – attributed.

The frustration of the New Fiction, expressed in *Aren't You Rather Young* and certainly reinforced by other members of Gordon's stable, is that the lessons of modernism had not been learned. New, efficient, inventive methods for achieving the goals of realism had been developed – but had not been recognised and adopted accordingly by the broader writing mainstream. It is for this reason that James notes that while "at moments, he appears like a latecomer to a movement that for other post-war writers was already institutionalised [...]" for Johnson, modernism was still-in-the-making and it was never too late to join in".<sup>29</sup> Johnson's evocation of Joyce in *Aren't You Rather Young* appears a clear and direct statement of influence; Joyce was an innovator for the novel form, and Johnson declares his intent to continue this project. Similar citation of modernist sources is made by

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, 'The Lessons of Modernism' p. 114

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> David James, 'B.S. Johnson Within the Ambit of Modernism' p. 52

others from the group outlined by Gordon, as an influential factor in developing theory and strategy for the writing for novels. Though operating some decades later, summaries of the climate of writing and criticism ongoing during the first half of the twentieth century reveal that Johnson and his contemporaries are not without justification. In *Reading the Graphic Surface*, Glyn White describes a circumstance in which “conventional criticism began to set itself against any kind of experimentation, dismissing divergence from traditional (but broadening) forms of representation”.<sup>30</sup> It is this precise situation to which Johnson so firmly objects, and in which Josipovici recognises a fundamental misunderstanding of modernism. In particular, Johnson raises complaints about a lingering, anachronistic notion of realism which persisted as if Joyce’s innovations had never taken place. Such commentary is closely reflected by White’s description of a tendency amongst mainstream novelists of the earlier twentieth century to “[ignore] the presence of new forms of representation, and [carry] on in the fashion of their nineteenth-century realist ancestors without any great anxiety about their medium”.<sup>31</sup> If indeed, as White goes on to state, it is the reserve of modernists to “reject the conventions of literary realism without renouncing its aspirations to the truthful depiction of the world”,<sup>32</sup> then Johnson’s assertion that his formal unorthodoxy serves the purpose of realism and truth clearly aligns him with this movement. Further examples, particularly from Woolf, appear to support this; if a key aim of modernism is to devise an approach to the novel which is more realistic and truthful to the chaos and idiosyncrasy of individual experience, New Fiction writing clearly represents a continuation of this project. In addition, the critical climate immediately preceding Johnson’s writing career provides clear rationale for doing so; the innovations of Modernism remained underutilised by authors, and underappreciated by critics suspicious of the experimental and wary of foreign influence. Johnson recognises the continued necessity of Modernism during the latter half of the twentieth century, to combat a pervasive conventional realism which is wilfully ignorant. By association, the New Fiction appears to take the form of a valuable intervention in this perceived downturn: short-lived but intensely engaged with the modernist project in search of a new, modern realism.

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<sup>30</sup> Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface* p. 51 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

### 2.3 Being Realistic: Two Anthologies

The body of criticism by New Fiction authors specifies examples of the realist models they oppose, particularly the writing exhibiting a failure to adapt to the innovations of modernism. Gordon in particular provides the means to examine the contextual location of the group's arguments in more detail. Gordon accuses Karl Miller's anthology *Writing in England Today* of overlooking "any writer whose abilities and inclinations were remotely divorced from the, so called, realistic",<sup>33</sup> hedging his use of the word 'realistic' to imply his dissatisfaction with the definition of this term, the body of work collected under it, and indeed the attention paid to those challenging it. Additionally, Gordon criticises Miller for looking to the past, noting that *Beyond the Words* predominantly features specially commissioned or unpublished works by the selected authors, whilst all of Miller's selections had been published previously.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Gordon would later continue to accuse Miller's anthology, stating in his 2001 introduction to Ann Quin's *Berg* that Miller "eulogised fiction (nonfiction and poetry too) as a division of journalism, of deadening social realism".<sup>35</sup> A comparison between Gordon's and Millers' commentaries on their respective anthological selections illuminates the stark contrasts between them. Miller, for example, states that *Writing in England Today* "sets out to give a picture of the work of the younger writers, in the main, and of the way in which themes and styles have behaved".<sup>36</sup> In meeting this task, particular attention is paid to a series of developments in British social realist writing of the mid-twentieth century, with an emphasis on truthfulness and realism. Whilst subsequent writing under The New Fiction banner has similar focus on new writing by young British authors and their creation of truthful, realistic narratives, there are major differences between how the two anthologies see this being achieved. Johnson and Gordon exalt the creation of new, innovative forms, influenced by contemporary culture and technologies. Miller establishes a series of negative connotations for such modernist inclinations. To do so, Miller cites Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson Jr's *The Modern Tradition*:

Committed to everything in human experience that militates against custom, abstract order, and even reason itself, modern literature has elevated individual existence over social man, unconscious feeling

<sup>33</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. 11

<sup>34</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. 11

<sup>35</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. xiii In: Ann Quin, *Berg* pp. i-xiv (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001)

<sup>36</sup> Karl Miller, 'Introduction' p. 27 In: Karl Miller (ed.), *Writing in England Today: The Last Fifteen Years* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) pp. 13-28

over self-conscious perception, passion and will over intellection and systematic morals, dynamic vision over the static image, dense actuality over practical reality.<sup>37</sup>

Literary realism is at the core of this extract, but it is an entirely different understanding of realism to that proposed by Johnson, Gordon et al. Miller describes the Modern movement as “ancient history”, attributing to it “awkwardness” and “scabrousness”<sup>38</sup> which have eroded the literary virtues of intellection, systematic morals, and practicality. Miller expands on Ellmann and Feidelson’s commentary with an implication that foreign influences have had a corrupting effect on British writing, claiming that “the fever for American literature which succeeded the ‘French flu’ in this country has resulted in a philistine condescension towards native writers”.<sup>39</sup> Miller’s vision of the contemporary mainstream reveals a general suspicion of the new, describing a literary climate “tired of the international, experimental avant-garde and of mandatory modernity”.<sup>40</sup> That Miller is singled-out by Gordon is indicative of the efficacy with which *Writing in England Today* encapsulates a largely oppositional view of contemporary British literature to that of *Beyond the Words*.

Miller’s anthology focuses on British writers “tired of the romantic individualism, the religiosity, the martyred sensitiveness that had been favoured by writers during the war”.<sup>41</sup> In doing so, Miller meets his task of selecting younger writers for his anthology,<sup>42</sup> yet in doing so actively avoids the introspective, experiential writing encouraged by The New Fiction. One of Miller’s key selections is a group of poets who “attracted a name which conferred the maximum degree of anonymity consistent with the purposes of identification and publicity: they painted themselves battleship-grey and were called ‘The Movement’”.<sup>43</sup> Miller credits Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* anthology with providing the definition of The

<sup>37</sup> Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, ‘Preface’ p. vi In: Karl Miller, ‘Introduction’ p. 2 [In: Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, *The Modern Condition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) pp. v-ix]

<sup>38</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 24

<sup>39</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 26

<sup>40</sup> Karl Miller, ‘Introduction’ p. 13

<sup>41</sup> Karl Miller, ‘Introduction’ p. 13

<sup>42</sup> Miller’s anthology features previously-published fiction, poetry and critical writing by Chinua Achebe, Kingsley Amis, Sybille Bedford, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Tony Connor, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, Margaret Drabble, William Empson, D.J. Enright, Ian Fleming, Roy Fuller, William Golding, Geoffrey Grigson, Thom Gunn, J.B.S. Haldane, Stuart Hampshire, Seamus Heaney, Aidan Higgins, Richard Hoggart, Ted Hughes, Dan Jacobson, Trooper Jones, Frank Kermode, Susanne Knowles, Philip Larkin, Doris Lessing, Shena Mackay, John McGahern, P.B. Medawar, Brian Moore, V.S. Naipaul, Conor Cruise O’Brien, Edna O’Brien, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Alan Sillitoe, Stevie Smith, Muriel Spark, David Storey, A.J.P. Taylor, Keith Thomas, R.S. Thomas, Evelyn Waugh, Arnold Wesker, Patrick White, Peter Willmott, and Michael Young, as well as lyrics by Syd Barrett, John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Movement's goals, and Donald Davie with establishing The Movement as "a people's literature".<sup>44</sup> Miller lists Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Philip Larkin, and John Wain alongside Conquest and Davie as key figures in The Movement who adopted "reversions to ordinary speech and moral earnestness",<sup>45</sup> and were "polite in the eighteenth-century sense – by virtue of a concern for manners and morals".<sup>46</sup> Writing by all six is featured in Miller's anthology, constituting a body of critical and creative works encapsulating the models of realism esteemed therein.

Conquest's introduction to *New Lines* is reproduced in full in Miller's anthology and demonstrates The Movement's moral and societal emphases, including the suspicion of international and avant-garde influences. Conquest quotes Aldous Huxley's attribution of a "rapid collapse of public taste"<sup>47</sup> to:

The sort of people whose bowels yearn at the disgusting caterwaulings of Tziganes; who love to listen to Negroes and Cossacks; who swoon at the noises of the Hawaiian guitar, the Russian balalaika, the Argentine saw and even the Wurlitzer organ.... In other words they are the sort of people who don't really like music.<sup>48</sup>

Though accepting that "there is no need to be quite so puritanical as Huxley",<sup>49</sup> Conquest states that Huxley "describes, only too clearly, the sort of corruption which has affected the general attitude to poetry in the last decade".<sup>50</sup> This corruption is in turn described by Conquest:

In this indiscriminating atmosphere other types of vicious taste, too, began to be catered for. The debilitating theory that poetry *must* be metaphorical gained wide acceptance. Poets were encouraged to produce diffuse and sentimental verbiage, or hollow technical pirouettes ... In these circumstances it became more plain than is usually the case that without integrity and judgement enough to prevent surrender to subjective moods or social pressures all the technical and emotional gifts are almost worthless.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 15

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Robert Conquest, 'New Lines' p. 55 In: Karl Miller (ed.), *Writing in England Today: The Last Fifteen Years* pp. 55-60

<sup>48</sup> Aldous Huxley, in Robert Conquest, 'New Lines' p. 56

<sup>49</sup> Robert Conquest, 'New Lines' p. 56

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

A series of negative connotations for the modern are established in Conquest's analysis here, with metaphor, "diffuse and sentimental verbiage" and formal experimentation stated as products of a failure to overcome "subjective moods or social pressures". Miller describes The Movement as an alternative to this growth in modern poetry, favouring instead the 'polite' – what Conquest goes on to describe as "a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry, of the principle that poetry is written by and for the whole man, intellect, emotions, senses and all".<sup>52</sup> Conquest's criteria for a new approach to modern poetry provides a guide to reading many of Miller's editorial selections.

Conquest's plainness of language is exemplified by contributions to Miller's anthology by D.J. Enright and Kingsley Amis. Enright's reading of *The Alexandria Quartet*, for example, demonstrates The Movement's suspicion of the individualistic:

'The Alexandria Quartet' seems to be built on the idea that one person can be different things to different observers, that a sequence of events can be interpreted in various ways and no way is any truer than another. The idea is neither novel nor true; or, if true, then true within such narrow limits that no tetralogy or 'quarter' or 'word-continuum' can safely be based on it.<sup>53</sup>

Refuting the narrative potential of a solipsistic approach to writing, Enright implies the unambiguous and the objective to be preferable characteristics to the individual and the experiential. To a similar end, in his review of *Lolita*, Amis accuses Vladimir Nabokov of "an appalling poverty of incident and even of narrative", stating the following:

There comes a point where the atrophy of moral sense, evident throughout this book, finally leads to a dullness, fatuity and unreality ... There is plenty of self-absorption around us, heaven knows, but not enough on this scale to be worth writing about at length, just as the mad are less interesting than the sane.<sup>54</sup>

The 'technical and emotional gifts' described by Conquest are recognised by Amis in Nabokov's portrayal of *Lolita*, but they are obscured by the "dullness, fatuity and unreality" of writing in borrowed English, and lacking the moral and societal concerns demanded by The Movement. The assertion that "the mad are less interesting than the sane" may, in this context, be extended to again infer that a subject matter influenced by individual

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Conquest, *op. cit* pp. 57-8

<sup>53</sup> D.J. Enright, *op. cit.* p. 46

<sup>54</sup> Kingsley Amis, *op. cit.* p. 75

subjectivity and disconnected from “systematic morals” is less fruitful, less literary, and perhaps less realistic, than The Movement’s suggested alternative.<sup>55</sup>

One also reads in Amis’ commentary on *Lolita* evidence of The Movement’s favoured sparsity of style, and plainness of language:

As well as *moral* and *beautiful*, the book is also held to be *funny*, often *devastatingly* so, and *satirical*. As for the *funny* part, all that registered with me were a few passages where irritation caused Humbert to drop the old style-scrambler for a moment and speak in clear.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to the evident preference for “speak[ing] in clear” expressed in this extract, Amis criticises the crafting of *Lolita* for “the laborious confection of equivalent apparatuses in the adoptive language”.<sup>57</sup> Further evidencing the suspicion of foreign influences on English literature (notable in this case for *Lolita* having been written in English prior to Nabokov’s own Russian translation), Amis declares *Lolita* to bear “the whole farrago of imagery, archaism, etc., which cannot strike even the most finely-tuned foreign ear as it strikes that of the native English-speaker”.<sup>58</sup>

Despite being primarily a poetic movement, The Movement provides vital context for the development of the twentieth-century novel, and in particular the social-realist novel to which Johnson, Gordon and their contemporaries took exception. The models for writing denounced by The New Fiction for clinging to nineteenth-century ideologies, and for failing to respond productively to Modernism, take shape within The Movement. The refusal of solipsistic, subjective writing, and the denial of influence from the international avant-garde, demonstrates the conservatism from which New Fiction authors suffered. Amis laments the “style-scrambler” and Conquest condemns “hollow technical pirouettes”, suggesting that the Movement denies the value of the exploratory and inventive approach to literary style and form which Gordon, Johnson and their contemporaries assert to be necessary in

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<sup>55</sup> Amis would go on to publish *The King’s English: A Guide to Modern Usage* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), presenting what he describes as a “defence of the language” (xii), and reinforcing many of the beliefs expressed in this earlier work. In a section on ‘Americanisms’, for instance, Amis states of the influence of American linguistic patterns on British writing that “no Englishman readily allows linguistic equality to an American or anyone else born outside these shores” (9).

<sup>56</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘She Was A Child and I Was A Child’ p. 76 In: Karl Miller, *Writing in England Today: The Last Fifteen Years* pp. 71-7

<sup>57</sup> Kingsley Amis, *op. cit.* p. 74

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

creating truthful narrative. Most notably, Miller emphasises the virtues of this conservatism through his anthology, praising the moral values and linguistic plainness at the heart of The Movement's "literature of the people", whilst *Beyond the Words* proposes entirely opposite aims.

Miller acknowledges that The Movement was "challenged from the outset",<sup>59</sup> being a short-lived movement for which "the novelty of its programme has been exaggerated".<sup>60</sup> The 'politeness' of the Movement is compared with contemporaneous works such as Sybille Bedford's *A Legacy*, Dan Jacobson's *A Dance in the Sun*, and Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, but contrasted against considerably impolite works such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* during the same time period. Stating that "if an alternative to Bohemia was available, alternatives to the Movement were too",<sup>61</sup> Miller acknowledges the diversity of writing taking place even whilst The Movement employed their "battleship-grey" plainness and restraint. Miller nevertheless credits The Movement with a key influential role in the development of the working-class, social-realist, kitchen-sink drama of the Angry Young Men, highlighting the prose of Amis and Wain alongside the criticism of Richard Hoggart, and the drama of John Osborne and fiction of Alan Sillitoe:

The literature of working-class life in the large cities which was contributed by Sillitoe, Hoggart, Osborne, and others, and which has transformed the content of British films and television, might well be reckoned a natural extension of the subject-matter of the Movement writers. But there are differences of emphasis. This is a nostalgic literature, which sometimes romanticizes the working class. The use of the word 'polite' in connexion with the Movement may seem strained or precious: it certainly doesn't apply to the activities of Alan Sillitoe's long-distance runner.<sup>62</sup>

One crucial statement from Miller demonstrates the continued opposition between his view of the modern mainstream and the writing later proposed by Johnson and Gordon:

That the search for new form hasn't prospered in Britain lately is not very alarming: a great deal of the new form that has been found here and elsewhere, is an illusion (William Burroughs' collage technique,

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<sup>59</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 15

<sup>60</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 14

<sup>61</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 15

<sup>62</sup> Karl Miller, *op. cit.* p. 17



for example), and the original abstention from experiment strikes me as having been both comprehensible and rewarding. What is lacking is not so much a bold or open-minded attitude to form as a fully extended view of the medium.<sup>63</sup>

This extract confirms several further points of divergence between Miller's and Gordon's anthologies. Primarily, Miller explicitly praises a lack of innovation, the reinforcement of traditional language, and the density of engagement with well-established literary forms. Gordon is, contrastingly, deeply concerned by a lack of formal innovation in mainstream British literature. Later criticism would continue to recognise this division; Martin Ryle in particular draws a sharp contrast between Johnson and Wain:

Johnson [...] expressed incredulity that despite the example of *Ulysses* most contemporary fiction continued to imitate the forms of nineteenth-century realism [...] Twelve years earlier, Wain had advocated just such literary conservatism.<sup>64</sup>

Much of the impetus behind Gordon's selection of writers is to promote an innovative and exploratory writing that creates or combines literary forms; Miller describes such activity as an "illusion", obscuring a "fully extended view of the medium". The selections made by Miller to represent the state of writing in England belong largely to literary movements keen to dismiss the "bold or open-minded attitude to form" exhibited by the foreign-influenced avant-garde. Johnson and Gordon, however, deny the virtues of such movements. Johnson claims that the invention – by experimentation or combination – of new literary forms constitutes a commitment to expanding the understanding of the novel in a technologically-informed climate. Gordon similarly encourages the search for new forms, asserting that newness is an inherent and necessary property of the novel itself. Johnson and Gordon are far from the "abstention from experiment" which Miller describes to be "comprehensible and rewarding", and the arguments posed in *Aren't You Rather Young* and *Beyond the Words* suggest that Miller's goals for a fully realised and extended understanding of the modern novel are best achieved by precisely those principles he casts aside.

Miller denounces the influence of international writing, claiming a condescension directed at native British writers working in established realist traditions. Charles Sugnet's

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26

<sup>64</sup> Martin Ryle, "'Educated and Intelligent, if Down-at-Heel': John Wain's *Hurry on Down* and B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* p. 103 In: Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle (eds.), *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde* pp. 103-17 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

introduction to his and Burns' interview collection *The Imagination on Trial* makes an opposing argument, crediting such disconnection from the international community with the failure of modern British literature to connect with an international audience. In doing so, Sugnet expresses alignment with The New Fiction writers, further evidenced by the inclusion of Burns, Figs and Johnson as interviewees. Sugnet states the "the prevailing American myth about British fiction is that it remains traditional, nostalgic, even stodgy".<sup>65</sup> He draws the following distinctions between the perceptions of post-war British, European and American literatures:

If you are an American undergraduate interested in "serious" or "experimental" fiction, your instructors will direct you to French works by Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Beckett, Butor, and younger writers like Monique Wittig or Philippe Sollers. They will assume your familiarity with certain North Americans (Pynchon, Hawkes, Barth, Coover) and will recommend the Latin Americans : Borges, Fuentes, Cortazar and especially Garcia Marquez. Will they recommend any British writers?<sup>66</sup>

Sugnet asserts that this American academic view assumes British literature to be built on a deeply conservative impression of social realism, later stating that "my acquaintances [American professors of literature] would add England is the country where the nineteenth century remains unchallenged".<sup>67</sup> Sugnet also mirrors Johnson, accusing "writers who pretend that *Ulysses* had never been written"<sup>68</sup> of reinforcing the "outdated social reality"<sup>69</sup> with which his American colleagues associate British literature. Though Sugnet makes no specific reference to Miller, *Writing in England Today* is implicated by its exhibition of the characteristics of writing which perpetuates the "continuing (and inaccurate) American belief about British fiction" which Sugnet describes. Writing from a position of retrospect in 1981, citing Burns, Gordon, Johnson, and *Beyond the Words* in particular, Sugnet suggests that were it not for their comparative obscurity, the writers gathered under The New Fiction banner would constitute evidence that these assumptions may finally be abandoned.

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Sugnet, 'Introduction' p. 2 In: Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss their Working Methods* pp. 2-13

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Charles Sugnet, *op. cit.* p. 3

<sup>68</sup> Charles Sugnet, *op. cit.* p. 3

<sup>69</sup> Charles Sugnet, *op. cit.* p. 2

*Writing in England Today* is Miller's documentation of ongoing developments in British literature, and *Beyond the Words* is Gordon's response, presenting an entirely opposite interpretation of what constitutes the future of British writing. Crucially, where Miller expresses suspicion of the avant-garde, Gordon embraces it, actively encouraging a disruptive and challenging approach to the realistic novel. The goals of The New Fiction are however not so wildly different in principle from the virtues celebrated by Miller. B.S. Johnson and Alan Burns in particular claim a similarly working-class literature, exploratory and enlarging the understanding of novelistic form in relation to lived experience. The New Fiction is attentive to existing styles, but is divergent from Miller in its radical treatment of them. The key points of opposition lie in Miller's and Gordon's respective definitions of truth and realism, and the methods by which they are achieved. Miller emphasises the importance of a poetry, and subsequently a wider literature, of modern humankind which reflects reality, reinforces morality, and maintains a plainness of language. Gordon's anthology, and Johnson's commentary, argues that such writing represents none of the individualistic, unconscious and unrestrained experience of modern people, and so cannot be relied upon to present the real. Both Johnson and Gordon assert that, in fact, the "technical pirouettes" dismissed by Conquest are made meaningful by their truthfulness – and that rather than a reflection of reality, they are its enactment. Additionally, The New Fiction is welcoming of foreign writing trends and their influence on British literature, being deeply entrenched in the avant-gardism which embraces the individualism and dynamism that Ellmann and Feidelson attribute to modern writing. Where Miller declares the influence of an American "fever" and a French "flu", a sickness on modern British literature, Gordon argues that the malady lies with Miller himself, proposing *Beyond the Words* as an "antidote" to the pervasive suspicion of unorthodoxy and newness which Miller represents.

Whilst modernism highlights an already-observable disconnection between The New Fiction writers and the models for realistic writing which occupy their contemporary climate, there is a clear discrepancy between these goals and the mainstream literary realism exhibited by groups such as The Movement. There are, however, crucial similarities and sympathies which support their assertions from outside Britain. Operating in parallel to the Movement and the rise of social realism in Britain in the 1950s comes, in France, the *Nouveau Roman* – a critical and creative literary movement with which The New Fiction

appears closely-aligned. Though domestic acclaim would be relatively sparse, the oversights of modernist progress perpetuated by anthologies such as Miller's are avoided overseas. This chapter's third investigation considers the manner in which The New Fiction is supported and reinforced by criticism from across the Channel.

## 2.4 The *Nouveau Roman*

Discussing the critical reception of his writing in *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?* Gordon describes, with deliberate tongue-in-cheek immodesty, the challenging nature of his own writing. In doing so he alludes to the influence of French writing on himself and Johnson made by Valentine Cunningham:

Why otherwise would Valentine Cunningham, an English don no less, write in the *Times Literary Supplement* when reviewing one of my books: 'There is even a case to be made for Giles Gordon being the only true inheritor of the late B.S. Johnson's mantle as one of the serious anglicizers of French modes'? I'm not sure about that 'even', but I was, for a while, persuaded 'even' if few others were.<sup>70</sup>

Comparisons between The New Fiction and their French counterparts have been sustained since early reviews of their writing. These French writers have been formally associated in literary criticism under the *Nouveau Roman* label, and the equivalency suggested by the parallels between this name (which translates into English as the 'New Novel') and The New Fiction is more than coincidence. A loosely-associated group of writers most prominently including Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute as well as Michel Butor, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, Jean Ricardou and Claude Simon, the *Nouveau Roman* constitutes a movement of innovative French writing in which The New Fiction finds its strongest contemporaneous critical-contextual parallel.

Unlike The New Fiction, the *Nouveau Roman* has enjoyed sustained critical study, and is the subject of focused critical works like Stephen Heath's *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (1972), Ann Jefferson's *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (1980), and John Calder and John Fletcher's *The Nouveau Roman Reader* (1986). The *Nouveau Roman* also remains an influential presence in contemporary literary criticism, discussed at length by Danielle Marx-Scouras in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental*

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<sup>70</sup> Giles Gordon, *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement?* p. 133

*Literature* (2012). Heath introduces the *Nouveau Roman* as a reaction to the existing mainstream understanding of literary realism. Heath primarily defines this realism in relation to Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, a towering sequence of more than ninety individual works including novels, short stories and essays reflecting on French society in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Heath describes the *Comédie Humaine* as a "construction ... natural, realistic in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, faithful to the object it copies or describes", <sup>71</sup> indicative of a mode of writing which is "not source of the real, but instrument of its representation". <sup>72</sup> For Heath, Balzac is observer and commentator, and the self-conscious act of writing is suppressed:

Balzac's famous project in the *Comédie Humaine* poses a problem of writing, but the writing itself does not in any way present a problem. The problem is the task – its extent, its magnitude, its performance – not the means by which the task is to be performed. <sup>73</sup>

Heath's discussion of Balzac is primarily contextualized in terms of its centrality to the discipline of literary realism in the nineteenth century, arguing that "most of the novels written today are 'Balzacian' in the sense of their commitment to the premisses of that writing", <sup>74</sup> and offers the following definition of a 'Balzacian' realism:

Realism then, as it has come to be understood in connection with the novel, is always grasped finally in some terms of the notion of the representation of 'Reality', which is reflected in the literary work as in a mirror. It is in the development of the novel in the nineteenth century, under the impetus of the desire to achieve a 'social realism', that the relation of realism in the novel and image of the mirror is definitively forged. <sup>75</sup>

Heath closes his reading of Balzac in terms of "its naturalness, its triumphant mirroring", but also in the adoption of the role of secretary and observer, an act of self-effacement: "an absence of writing; language is lost in a monologue of re-presentation". <sup>76</sup>

Heath's discussion of literary realism describes a subsequent shift towards a self-conscious focus on writing practice itself, which develops during the near-century following

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek Books, 1972) p. 16

<sup>72</sup> Stephen Heath, *op. cit.* p. 18

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Heath, *op. cit.* p. 15

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 19-21

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22

the publication of the *Comédie Humaine*. Balzac is identified as the foundations for an evolutionary trajectory built upon expanding and challenging notions of literary realism, constituting an increased interest in a

profound experience of language and form and the demonstration of that experience in the writing of the novel which, transgressed, is no longer repetition and self-effacement but work and self-presentation as *text*. Its 'realism' is not the mirroring of some 'Reality' but an attention to the forms of the intelligibility in which the real is produced, a dramatization of possibilities of language, forms of articulation, limitations, of its own horizon.<sup>77</sup>

Heath appears to be in agreement with other critical readings of an apparent shift in literary and realist ideologies. In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Danielle Marx-Scouras describes the emergence of writing "attacking the notion that literature passively reflects social practice", and paraphrases Roland Barthes in describing this process to be a product of a situation in which "language was no longer considered a mere instrument or decoration, but rather a sign and a truth".<sup>78</sup> Marx-Scouras expands this reading to assert that such a shift was an explicitly political act, arguing that "socialist realism [...] presupposed the absolute subordination of art and literature to political ends",<sup>79</sup> and that Robbe-Grillet's innovations constituted a resistance to such subordination. This shift is recognised in John Fletcher and John Calder's *The Nouveau Roman Reader* (1986):

Flaubert took naturalism a step further, enquiring more deeply into human behaviour and the workings of mind ... Another generation on, Zola examined and described human activities that had previously been unmentionable ... he took naturalism to its limit as far as the human eye and the time of the clock was concerned. After that, man and his behaviour had to be seen through a microscope to get a more detailed picture.<sup>80</sup>

Fletcher and Calder cite Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) as the next significant generational waypoint in the continuing development of post-Balzac, naturalist French writing. Flaubert's 'deep investigations' with this text provoked controversy; the objective portrayal of Emma Bovary's adultery (as opposed to the moralistic) faced legal action for its

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22

<sup>78</sup> Danielle Marx-Scouras, 'The Nouveau Roman and Tel Quel', p. 90 In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013) pp. 89-100

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28

perceived obscenity. What identifies Flaubert's position in this post-Balzac context is a precision of observation and a close pursuit of objectivity without moralist commentary.

Émile Zola is the next example cited by Fletcher and Calder, and is credited with moving the French novel further still from Balzac's mirror on society:

Looking at the French novel in particular, one can say that every twenty years after 1830 a new school of the novel came into being, each one stretching the framework a little further in the search for truth and more accurate description. Zola in particular was interested in science and the development of scientific method in terms of objectivity and experiment, and he tried to apply these techniques to literature.<sup>81</sup>

Fletcher and Calder's summary of Zola indicates a set of writing priorities which, following the trajectory from Balzac through Flaubert, appear radical. The influence of scientific methodology is clarified further in Zola's *Le Roman Experimental*, a critical work published in 1880 which, influenced heavily by the work of Charles Darwin, called for the application of scientific methodology – experimentation – in the writing of fiction. In the given context, this appears in stark contrast to Balzac's language-as-mirror strategy, proposing an active and potentially transformative approach to writing far removed from the passivity Heath identifies in Balzac. The sequence of twenty works which constitute Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* is itself influenced by the *Comédie Humaine*, designed however not as a reflection of a broader society but a focused study of several generations of the Rougon-Macquart family built upon a scientific understanding of heredity and social conditioning. Zola's writing then is no longer a reflection of the society its author observes, but a practice subject to self-consciously applied methodologies.

Seeing Zola as having taken naturalism to its limit, Fletcher and Calder argue that it is Marcel Proust who pushed the novel into new territory, expanding Zola's application of scientific methods to incorporate form and technique borrowed from other media, and in doing so prompting a further significant shift in focus for the French novel:

Proust not only carried naturalistic observation a stage further by stretching out clock time to memory time, he also turned naturalism into anti-naturalism, or more accurately, he transferred the techniques of painterly and musical impressionism into literature, so

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<sup>81</sup> John Fletcher and John Calder (eds.), *The Nouveau Roman Reader* pp. 28-9

that it is not the measured pace of events observed and accurately described that takes on importance, but the significant moments in memory.<sup>82</sup>

Heath identifies a deconstruction of the modes of representation present in the writing of Balzac, and here again the influence of modernism is clear. In particular, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is cited as a primary example of the literature made achievable by such a deconstruction. Rather than a Balzacian realism built upon the observation and representation of an external 'real', Joyce exhibits a comprehensively different focus, a close attention to writing practice itself. Rejecting the notion of self-effacing authorship, emphasis is instead placed, as Heath observes of Proust, upon the authorial subjectivities of form and language in a new interpretation of the 'real':

Instead of effacing itself before a 'Reality' projected as its precedent, language, in this emphasis, is grasped as specific locus of the articulation of the real, of its real-ization. The practice of writing ... can be defined exactly as a radical experience of language.<sup>83</sup>

Heath asserts that Joyce's writing constitutes yet one further radical deconstruction of one of the predominant realist modes of the nineteenth century. Moving away from the trappings of a perfect instrument of language and form which observes, represents and records an external real, Heath presents Joyce as an author who engages a self-conscious dialogue between language and form. In doing so, Joyce can be seen to complete a near hundred-year-long shift away from the Balzacian realist model.

Evidently, the emergence of challenging, innovative young writers from the shadow of Joyce can be identified as common to The New Fiction and the *Nouveau Roman*, each developing the goal of a post-Joycean, contemporary and experiential novel. It is against the backdrop of Balzacian realism, and the subsequent challenges to the realist mode traced through Flaubert, Zola, Proust, and Joyce, that Heath situates the beginnings of the *Nouveau Roman*:

The 'Balzacian' novel ... stands for everything the *Nouveau Roman* is concerned to call into question and it is not surprising to find the

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<sup>82</sup> John Fletcher and John Calder (eds.), *op. cit.* p. 29

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* p. 24



destruction of that novel (of its ‘innocence’, and so of the whole form) consciously worked through in many examples.<sup>84</sup>

Whilst Johnson and Gordon’s complaints regarding the nineteenth-century novel are presented in general terms, Heath’s history of the *Nouveau Roman* is presented as distinctly retaliatory against specific targets. Where Johnson denounces the failure of British writing to accommodate and learn from Joyce’s innovations, Heath argues that, following almost a century of upheaval in the principle form of the novel, “the situation of the Nouveau Roman is post-Joyce”.<sup>85</sup> The innovative approach to writing which Johnson demanded was already taking place in France.

The *Nouveau Roman* is, like The New Fiction, most clearly defined by a pair of texts written by its two most prominent members. Sarraute’s *L’Ère de Soupçon* (1956) comprises four essays written between 1947 and 1956, appearing in English for the first time in 1963, published in the USA by George Braziller as *The Age of Suspicion*, and in Britain by Calder alongside her short prose collection *Tropismes* (1939) as *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet’s *Pour un Nouveau Roman* (1963), a collection of essays written between 1953 and 1963, was published by Calder in English in 1965 as *For a New Novel*. Calder’s intention to not only publish and publicise the *Nouveau Roman* in Britain, but formulate an equivalent British group, was certainly timely. The period of time bookended by the original French publications predates that of The New Fiction, but their English translations appear in close proximity to the period covered by Johnson and Gordon – and are coupled with a widely publicised tour of UK universities organised by Calder & Boyars. Whilst the two texts do not share the relationship of direct influence observed between Johnson’s *Aren’t You Rather Young* and Gordon’s *Beyond the Words*, they nevertheless provide a similarly focused body of criticism.

## 2.5 Nathalie Sarraute and *The Age of Suspicion*

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29

The four essays collected in *The Age of Suspicion* represent Sarraute's investigation into the modern novel in France, originally published in 1956, and first translated into English for publication in 1963. The titular essay of Sarraute's collection begins much like Johnson's, with an assessment of a mainstream writing culture bound to a set of restrictive conventions and operating within a critical climate which reinforces those conventions. Sarraute laments the tendency for literary critics to

seize every opportunity to proclaim, as though announcing a fundamental truth, that the novel, unless they are very much mistaken, is and always will be, first and foremost, 'a story in which characters move and have their being', that no novelist is worthy of the name unless he is able to 'believe in' his characters.<sup>86</sup>

Sarraute reveals a frustration at the near-puritanical certainty she observes in the critical identity of a novel's purposes and capabilities, and connects this to a demand for realism and believability in the fundamental narrative building-block of character. It is specifically the demand for character which Sarraute targets for criticism, approaching with a degree of sarcasm the prevalent critical habit to

lavish praise on novelists who, like Balzac or Flaubert, succeed in making their hero 'stand out', thus adding one more 'unforgettable' figure to the unforgettable figures with which so many famous novelists have already peopled our world.<sup>87</sup>

Sarraute's citation of Balzac and Flaubert connects her commentary on pervasive contemporary attitudes to literature and the novel to the same history of French writing later summarised by critics such as Heath, Calder, and Fletcher. After a century of moving slowly away from the determinedly realistic mirror on society presented by Balzac, Sarraute describes a lack of forward progress in the understanding of the novel, and a saturation of writing which rarely challenged it. French writing may indeed have borne many unforgettable characters at this time, but Sarraute suggests that unforgettability is redundant without distinguishability. Presented with an impregnable mass of identically iconic figures, all are outstanding, and therefore none truly stand out. It is for combatting this scenario, and proposing a radical alternative understanding of the novel, that Ann

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<sup>86</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, 'The Age of Suspicion' p. 53 In: Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1963) pp. 51-74

<sup>87</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* p. 54

Jefferson describes the *Nouveau Roman* – and Sarraute’s contributions in particular – to offer “an antithesis to the mainstream of realist fiction”.<sup>88</sup>

Sarraute’s criticisms of the prevailing critical attitudes to the French novel at this time are notably similar to those raised by Johnson more than twenty years later. Johnson’s exclamation that “life does not tell stories”<sup>89</sup> is consistent with his French predecessor’s ideas, as Sarraute claims that “[the reader] has begun to doubt whether the novelist’s artificially constructed object is capable of secreting the wealth of the real object”.<sup>90</sup> Sarraute also claims that the “impersonal tone”<sup>91</sup> associated by later critics such as Heath, Calder, and Fletcher with Balzac, “so well adapted to the needs of the old-style novel, is not suitable for conveying the complex, tenuous states that [the author] is attempting to portray”.<sup>92</sup> In making such assertions, Sarraute begins to outline the key premise of her essay: that contemporary literature has entered an “age of suspicion”, in which the established formulae applied in the writing of literary fiction such as narrative, voice, character and chronology, are no longer trusted to reflect or reproduce the reality experienced by the modern reader. What Sarraute terms the “old-style novel”, the Balzacian “instrument of representation”, is comparable to the nineteenth-century narrative novel which Johnson describes as outdated and exhausted. Where Johnson asserts the form to be “finished”,<sup>93</sup> Sarraute claims that central characteristics of the form such as character and narrative linearity have lost readers’ support because an awareness of the constructedness of the form now limits the reader’s sympathy with the fictional character. Sarraute observes that the reader has come to recognise the character, and particularly the literary hero, as “an arbitrary limitation, a conventional figure cut from the common woof”.<sup>94</sup> Later, Figs would argue that the realist novel lacked realism for much the same reason, and Johnson would claim that the artificial construction of fiction necessary afforded the reader artificiality rather than truth, and both would state that the resultant novels were far from realistic and, rather, were deceitful in nature. Sarraute anticipates these arguments,

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<sup>88</sup> Ann Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 5

<sup>89</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* P. 14

<sup>90</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, ‘The Age of Suspicion’ p. 62

<sup>91</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* p. 65

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> B.S. Johnson, ‘Introduction’ p. 11 In: B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t you Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* pp. 11-31

<sup>94</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, ‘The Age of Suspicion’ p. 62

asserting over two decades earlier that the reader does not see their reality reflected in such writing, and hence their faith in narrative has faltered, and they are rendered “suspicious of what the author’s imagination has to offer”.<sup>95</sup>

Sarraute anticipates *The New Fiction* in a number of ways, formulating a solution to contradictions and incompatibilities she observes between established literary realism and the creation of realistic literature. Suggesting a climate of new media to be at the heart of the reader’s mistrust, Sarraute connects a growing awareness of the artificiality of storytelling to the conservatism and fear of the new which perpetuates it, accusing critics of “warning novelists that if they are not vigilant, their best-armed rival, the cinema, will one day wrest the sceptre from their unworthy hands”.<sup>96</sup> Such vigilance clings to the trusted models of Balzacian naturalism and realism, and Sarraute argues that it is precisely such conservatism contributes to the problem. Like Johnson, Sarraute recognises the threat which cinema poses to the cultural primacy of writing as a storytelling medium, and again like Johnson she proposes that the novel is itself capable of resisting this threat. Sarraute further connects the developments she observes in modern literature to other media, drawing – as Burns and Figes would later – from painting and photography:

In a movement analogous to that of painting, the novel, which only a stubborn adherence to obsolete techniques places in the position of a minor art, pursues with means that are uniquely its own a path which can only be its own; it leaves to the other arts – and, in particular, to the cinema – everything that does not actually belong to it. In the same way that photography occupies and fructifies the fields abandoned by painting, the cinema garners and perfects what is left by the novel.<sup>97</sup>

Sarraute’s diagnosis is consistent with Johnson’s later claims that a new medium assume roles and characteristics claimed by an older one, and that the print novel may evolve and thrive by focusing on what it alone can do better than any other medium. While stubbornness and an unwillingness to adapt in the face of newer media might consign the novel to the ‘minor’ arts, an opportunity arises to further explore the novel, its practice and its craft, so it might reassert itself as a contemporary medium. Sarraute also mirrors Johnson’s criticism of a contemporary literature too reliant on “obsolete techniques”.

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<sup>95</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* p. 57

<sup>96</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* p. 54

<sup>97</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* pp. 72-3

Rather than falling prey to the criticism which applies “confining limitations in which a regard for likelihood imprisons the boldest of novelists”,<sup>98</sup> Sarraute observes an exchange of roles and characteristics with other media, and so examines the inherent strengths of the novel form itself.

Sarraute may also be viewed as a forebear to The New Fiction’s emphasis on representing individual and idiosyncratic experience, and the creation or combination of novelistic form tailored to suit this particular goal. Rather than the reflection of society and denial of authorial self created by Balzac’s mirror, Sarraute proposes that the artificiality of the novel and inherent selfhood present in writing practice affords the opportunity to explore an entirely different realistic model:

Today, everyone is well aware, without being told, that “la Bovary – c’est moi”. And since the important thing now, rather than to extend indefinitely the list of literary types, is to show the co-existence of contradictory emotions and to reproduce as closely as possible the wealth and complexity of the world of the psyche, the writer, in all honesty, writes about himself.<sup>99</sup>

Sarraute uses Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as an example of the articulation of the authorial self within fiction. Most significant in this extract is the set of priorities Sarraute ascribes to this activity, as she asserts that the “wealth and complexity of the world of the psyche” is primarily reproduced through the novel by incorporating contradictory and emotional subject matter, focused on oneself. In this, Sarraute exemplifies Heath’s claims that the *Nouveau Roman* emphasises self-aware, authorial practice, and makes an argument with which Johnson’s later statements may be compared. Johnson, for example, asserts “what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing.”<sup>100</sup> Here, Johnson explains his intention to create a dialogue between reader and author through his novels which, rather than ignoring its artificiality, is self-aware and self-referential of that dialogue. David James describes this as a process by which “Johnson self-consciously formulates a model of *creative reading*”,<sup>101</sup> and in doing so alludes to similar processes described by Shlovsky. By asserting the important of

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<sup>98</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* p. 63

<sup>99</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *op. cit.* pp. 66-7

<sup>100</sup> B.S. Johnson, ‘Introduction’ p. 28

<sup>101</sup> David James, ‘The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in *Albert Angelo*’ p. 28 In: Philip Tew and Glyn White (eds.), *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* pp. 27-37 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

his own role in this dialogue, Johnson demands that his reader acknowledge theirs, and recognise their participatory role in a conscious communicative exchange with the text. The proposal made is also once again opposite to Balzac's mirror – where previously the author might disappear behind the reflection of society through secretarially-produced works, both Johnson and Sarraute argue that the author has been brought to the fore by a focus on the craft and practice of writing. In turn, the role of the reader is emphasised, and specifically made to acknowledge an awareness of novelistic artifice and authorial presence in the text. James expands upon this notion:

The primacy of visible form for Johnson raises the question of how typography can be refashioned and arranged to intensify the reader's engagement with, and eventual immersion in, depicted events and emotions.<sup>102</sup>

It is within this newer criticism that links between Johnson and his French predecessors are clarified; the retroactive position incorporating a closer awareness of Modernism invites a reading focused on the close combination of form and subject matter. No longer swayed by the broader accusations of superficial experimentalism present in much pre-millennial criticism, Modernism and the *Nouveau Roman* provide a clear, methodical lens for identifying the New Fiction's key characteristics and placing them in context. The marrying-together of form and subject matter, built upon selfhood and individuality expressed by both author and reader, is in this instance the solution to the 'suspicion' Sarraute attributes to a reading public: a way to create truthful, realistic works in the novel form which incorporates this new awareness rather than ignoring it. There is, as James concludes, a "twin trajectory of provocation and innovation"<sup>103</sup> in Johnson's writing, and the same appears true of Sarraute; and both halves of the equation are crucial to accurately situation the resultant works in context. For the determination to refocus the novel on this new purpose, Sarraute may once again be viewed as a critical and creative precursor to The New Fiction's (and Johnson's in particular) understanding of the form, and a crucial milestone along the trajectory connecting the New Fiction from Modernism through to post-millennial criticism.

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<sup>102</sup> David James, 'The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in *Albert Angelo* p. 29

<sup>103</sup> David James, *op. cit.* p. 30

## 2.6 Alain Robbe-Grillet, and *For a New Novel*

Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel* collects essays on the subject of contemporary fiction and the future of the novel, written between 1953 and 1963. Making a series of discrete challenges to established views of the modern novel, Robbe-Grillet discusses the writing of realistic literature in 'From Realism to Reality' (1955-63), narrative chronology and the author-reader relationship in 'Time and Description in Fiction Today' (1963), the novel's relationship to contemporary society in 'On Several Obsolete Notions' (1957) and 'New Novel, New Man' (1961), and most significantly of all, potential futures for the novel in 'A Future for the Novel' (1956). Crucially, Robbe-Grillet's collection spans the decade which separates the original writing of Sarraute's criticism (republished in *The Age of Suspicion*) from the body of work representing The New Fiction (in Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young* and Gordon's *Beyond the Words*). A summary of the central arguments and assertions made in Robbe-Grillet's essays reveals the critical and contextual connections between himself, Sarraute, and their New Fiction successors.

In 'A Future for the Novel', Robbe-Grillet writes from a position in which the novel appears under threat from its own lack of progress, describing the degree to which the future appeared bleak:

The art of the novel [...] has fallen into such a state of stagnation – a lassitude acknowledged and discussed by the whole of critical opinion – that it is hard to imagine such an art can survive for long without some radical change. To many, the solution seems simple enough: such a change being impossible, the art of the novel is dying. This is far from certain.<sup>104</sup>

Dissenting from the idea of the novel's supposedly imminent death, Robbe-Grillet proposes – more than a decade prior to The New Fiction – that there are formal, technical and ideological models by which it might be saved. When Robbe-Grillet states that "the minds best disposed to the idea of a necessary transformation, those most willing to countenance and even to welcome the value of experiment, remain, nonetheless, the heirs of a tradition",<sup>105</sup> he makes the dual assertion that transformation and experimentation is a necessity, and that such a process belongs firmly within a known trajectory of novelistic

<sup>104</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel' p. 17 In: Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989) pp. 15-24

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition. Expanding on his argument, Robbe-Grillet states that a newness of form is necessarily achieved through a combinatory approach to formal experiment and literary tradition, a mutually-progressive writing model which situates the contemporary writer “within an intellectual culture and a literature which can only be those of the past”.<sup>106</sup>

Comparisons between Robbe-Grillet’s arguments in *For a New Novel* and those made by The New Fiction are clear, and allegiances can also be identified between Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute’s prior argument about a pervasive suspicion of novelistic fundamentals. In ‘On Several Obsolete Notions’, Robbe-Grillet argues:

We are so accustomed to discussions of “character”, “atmosphere”, “form”, “content”, of “message” and “narrative ability” and “true novelists” that it requires an effort to free ourselves from this spider web and realize that it represents an idea about the novel (a ready-made idea, which everyone admits without argument, hence a dead idea), and not at all that so-called “nature” of the novel in which we are supposed to believe.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst Sarraute focuses specifically on character, Robbe-Grillet expands the argument to incorporate a substantial list of supposed novelistic fundamentals, about which he expresses a notably Sarrautian suspicion. Robbe-Grillet indicates, for example, the extent to which character itself is “a mummy now, but one still enthroned with the same – phony – majesty, among the values revered by traditional criticism”.<sup>108</sup> Of story, Robbe-Grillet asserts that “to tell a story well is [...] to make what one writes resemble the prefabricated schemas people are used to, in other words, their ready-made idea of reality”,<sup>109</sup> and that under such conditions, “to tell a story has become strictly impossible”.<sup>110</sup> Discussing form, Robbe-Grillet rebukes accusations of gratuitous reinvention, arguing that formal innovation “obviously appears as gratuitousness when the system of references is fixed *from without*”,<sup>111</sup> citing conflict between the internal demands of narrative art and the external demands of convention which dictate its critical reception.

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<sup>106</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘A Future for the Novel’ p. 18

<sup>107</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘On Several Obsolete Notions’ p. 25

<sup>108</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* p. 27

<sup>109</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* p. 31

<sup>110</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* p. 33

<sup>111</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* p. 45



Robbe-Grillet's assertions about the creation of a new novel are distilled in the essay-cum-manifesto 'New Novel, New Man', an attempt "to give a good idea of the general program of our movement's actual enterprise"<sup>112</sup> in the face of critical assumptions and simplifications. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet presents a simple list of the mistakes to correct:

Here then is the charter of the New Novel as general supposition circulates it: 1) The New Novel has codified the laws of the future novel. 2) The New Novel has made a *tabula rasa* of the past. 3) The New Novel seeks to eliminate man from the world. 4) The New Novel aims at a perfect objectivity. 5) The New Novel, difficult to read, is addressed only to specialists.<sup>113</sup>

In response to this set of critical assumptions, Robbe-Grillet structures his essay around challenging each individual notion with a retort, constituting five corresponding subdivisions: 'The New Novel is not a theory, it is an exploration'; 'The New Novel is merely pursuing a constant evolution of the genre'; 'The New Novel is interested only in man and in his situation in the world'; 'The New Novel aims only at a total subjectivity'; and 'The New Novel is addressed to all men of good faith'. Additionally, Robbe-Grillet makes two further assertions: 'The New Novel does not propose a ready-made signification'; and 'The only possible commitment for the writer is literature'. The writing model created by Robbe-Grillet's manifesto is notably similar to that created by The New Fiction, focused around subjectivity and individualism in a contemporary setting, practically exploratory rather than theoretical, and concerned with the evolution of form.

Further concordance between criticism from the *Nouveau Roman* and The New Fiction lies in Robbe-Grillet's astute observation of the difficulties which new writing faces:

A new form will always seem more or less an absence of any form at all, since it is unconsciously judged by reference to the consecrated forms [...] The stammering newborn work will always be regarded as a monster, even by those who find experiment fascinating. There will be some curiosity, of course, some gestures of interest, always some provision for the future. And some praise; though what is sincere will always be addressed to the vestiges of the familiar, to all those bonds from which the new work has not yet broken free and which desperately seek to imprison it in the past.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'New Novel, New Man' p. 133

<sup>113</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* p. 134

<sup>114</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel' pp. 17-8

In making this argument, Robbe-Grillet describes precisely the “conservativeness”<sup>115</sup> Johnson would come to identify, in 1973, as the primary barrier to critical acceptance of his creative and critical rationale. Robbe-Grillet provides context to a critical landscape which Johnson accuses of ensuring that “the reasons why I have written in the ways that I have done have become lost, have never reached as many people, nor in anything like a definitive form”.<sup>116</sup> Over a decade after Robbe-Grillet’s original writing of the essays collected in *For a New Novel*, it is still the “consecrated forms” and “vestiges of the familiar” which limit critical recognition of innovative writing, and The New Fiction continues to recognise and challenge this scenario. The comparison is confirmed in ‘On Several Obsolete Notions’ when, just as Johnson asserts that “‘experimental’ to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for ‘unsuccessful’”,<sup>117</sup> Robbe-Grillet argues:

The word “avant-garde”, for example, despite its note of impartiality, generally serves to dismiss – as though by a shrug of the shoulders – any work that risks giving a bad conscience to the literature of mass consumption. Once a writer renounces the well-worn formulas and attempts to create his own way of writing, he finds himself stuck with the label “avant-garde”.<sup>118</sup>

Robbe-Grillet makes near-identical complaints to Johnson and Gordon about the critical reception to his ongoing novelistic project. Similarly limited by critical conservatism, yet committed to challenging the conservative understanding of modern novelistic practice, the *Nouveau Roman* writers can be viewed as ideological allies and direct predecessors to The New Fiction.

In addition to the clear ideological similarities between Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and The New Fiction writers, *For a New Novel* also provides arguments and observations which contextualise the creative and literary-critical discussions that characterise both groups. In ‘A Future for the Novel’, Robbe-Grillet posits that if a new set of norms for the novel is to be constructed, it will not be through a wild experimentalism, but a measured and rigorous enquiry into the form’s history within which experimentation is a crucial component:

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<sup>115</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 19

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘On Several Obsolete Notions’ p. 26

If the norms of the past serve to measure the present, they also serve to construct it. The writer himself, despite his desire for independence, is situated within an intellectual culture and a literature which can only be those of the past. It is impossible for him to escape altogether from this tradition of which he is the product.<sup>119</sup>

Robbe-Grillet asserts that the hypothetical new novel can be created through a process of radical change, but without losing sight of the context of the novel itself. This position is echoed by Johnson and Gordon, who both assert the importance of the novel's history to its ongoing evolution. Crucially, when Robbe-Grillet goes on to identify the historical and ideological contexts in which this new novel will operate, he makes the same connections as Sarraute, and later *The New Fiction*; this new novel will be innovatively realistic.

Robbe-Grillet begins 'From Realism to Reality' with the statement that "all writers believe they are realists".<sup>120</sup> In doing so, he claims the author's innate desire to represent or encapsulate reality, and comments on the different manners in which realism is itself interpreted:

If they are mustered under this flag, it is not to wage common combat there; it is in order to tear one another to pieces. Realism is the ideology which each brandishes against his neighbor, the quality which each believes he possesses for himself alone.<sup>121</sup>

If realism is indeed such contested ground, the conflicts described earlier in this chapter between Johnson's and Gordon's interpretations of realistic writing and those described and endorsed by Miller occupy much of the territory which Robbe-Grillet describes. When Robbe-Grillet goes on to outline a broader history to this conflict, the discussions made about realism by *The New Fiction* and the *Nouveau Roman* are placed into context:

Out of a concern for realism each new literary school has sought to destroy the one which preceded it; this was the watchword of the romantics against the classicists, then of the naturalists against the romantics; the surrealists themselves declared in their turn that they were concerned only with the real world.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'On Several Obsolete Notions' p. 18

<sup>120</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'From Realism to Reality' p. 157

In: Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* pp. 157-68

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *op. cit.* pp. 157-8

Robbe-Grillet's argument here can be used to assert that, when Johnson and Gordon each argue that their quest for innovation is driven by a desire for truth and realism they seek to occupy challenging territory, and claim the destruction of their predecessors. The denouncement of nineteenth century narrative realism made in New Fiction criticism may be viewed, in this context, as an expression of outrage that such destruction was yet to take place. Additionally, such an argument strengthens Johnson's and Gordon's claims that their writing is not experimental, but merely contemporary and novelistic, indicating the efficacy with which their assertions belong to a wider documented history of novelistic practice.

By using Robbe-Grillet to bridge the period of time separating Sarraute from The New Fiction, one can observe a sustained effort to challenge an inflexible critical view of the modern novel on both sides of the Channel. Crucially the *Nouveau Roman* and The New Fiction appear to identify similar problems, and in turn design similar creative solutions. The widespread, mainstream understanding of the novel is seen by both groups as a cause for stagnation and exhaustion in the form. In response both argue that it is the responsibility of the modern author to challenge this understanding, and to treat it with suspicion. Wilful formal unorthodoxy, paired with a sustained concern for realism, produces the blueprint for a novel which challenges a long-held status quo.

## **2.7 The *Nouveau Roman* in Britain**

The comparisons made in this chapter between the *Nouveau Roman* and The New Fiction establish the former as vital context for the latter. These comparisons have, however, been made retroactively and theoretically, and we have not answered the question of whether the *Nouveau Roman* has a direct relationship of influence over the attempted formation of The New Fiction. This issue can be resolved by investigating the presence of the *Nouveau Roman* in Britain during the period of time outlined by The New Fiction, and points of convergence when the two groups encounter one another as contemporaries. Such practical connections can be made by examining the role of John Calder in bringing the *Nouveau Roman* to Britain. As already noted in Chapter Two of this thesis, Calder expressed, in correspondence with Alan Burns, the desire to form a group representing the new generation of challenging British writers. Calder's importance is also recognised by Gordon

in his introduction to *Berg*, particularly in relation to the dominant mainstream modes of writing exhibited in Miller's anthology:

The British literary establishment was much turned on, after the Second World War and Churchillian patriotism, by the irreverence and anti-intellectualism the Angry Young Men. There was a smug rejoicing that Kingsley Amis should in *Lucky Jim* have a character refer to "beastly Mozart."

To those of us resenting this parochialism, the publications of John Calder were a breath of fresh air. He introduced us to Beckett, Burroughs, Creeley, Duras, Claude Mauriac, Henry Miller, Pinget, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and the important Sottish novelist, Alexander Trocchi. We felt fiction mattered again.<sup>123</sup>

The final section of this chapter demonstrates that Calder's intentions were to introduce innovative European literature, and so instigate a resurgence of the modern British novel by young writers. It examines his position as critic and publisher of *Nouveau Roman* writing in Britain, and recognises in Calder's work a declaration of equivalency between the two groups.

In *The Nouveau Roman Reader*, Calder and John Fletcher introduce the *Nouveau Roman* by examining the nature of challenging literary movements, and the comparisons which may be made to their English contemporaries:

New literary movements are usually brought into being by the dissatisfaction of a generation of writers with the current literary mode. Usually too, a new literary approach is one aspect of an outlook that is taking hold in the intellectual and artistic thinking of the time, which one would expect to find in the other arts as well. In the early nineteenth century, both the English and the French novel felt a need to take a new path away from the unrealities of the romantic novel with its cardboard characters and 'idealized' view of human motivation, sacrificing real observation to poetic sentiment.<sup>124</sup>

Calder and Fletcher identify common ground shared by The New Fiction and the *Nouveau Roman*, and their account of it bears several key similarities to arguments and observations from Heath, Gordon, Johnson, Sarraute, and Robbe-Grillet, noted earlier in this chapter. Calder connects the emergence of literary movements to the "dissatisfaction of a

<sup>123</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. ix In: Ann Quin, *Berg* pp. ix-xiv

<sup>124</sup> John Fletcher and John Calder, *The Nouveau Roman Reader* p. 28

generation of writers". Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet clearly personify such a trend taking place in France during the mid-twentieth century, raising complaints about the Balzacian novel and outdated notions of novelistic practice and criticism. Johnson and Gordon similarly exemplify such claims, criticising a contemporary writing climate that clung to the nineteenth century, overlooking technical and technological innovation. When Calder observes such challenges to be representative of broader "intellectual and artistic thinking" both the *Nouveau Roman* and New Fiction writers satisfy his criteria, each attending to the role of other media in the development of the novel and aiming to represent modern people living modern lives. Whilst still presenting a theoretical discussion, Calder is himself a contemporary of the two groups and, as a founding member of Calder & Boyars, published writing by both groups including the first English translations of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet. Calder's positioning thus demonstrates that the connections drawn between the two groups are pertinent to the time of writing, rather than a construction of a retroactive reading.

Calder's essay 'La Jeune Literature Anglaise' provides further evidence of his role. The early section of the essay builds a view of the contemporary literary climate akin to that presented in Gordon's criticism of Miller, voicing similar criticisms to those raised by Gordon and Johnson. Calder begins by examining drama during the early twentieth century:

Ten years ago John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, the first play of a new commitment to revolt and a rejection of bourgeois [sic] light theatre as exemplified by Noel Coward, caught the public imagination. It is called the play that changed the English theatre. But in fact *Look Back in Anger* has changed little and Osborne has few imitators. The play that really caught the imagination of youth was *Waiting for Godot*, and the significant English playwrights of the last decade, Pinter, Simpson, Saunders, Bond, all derive their inspiration from Beckett and Ionesco [...] The myth of Osborne as the father figure of the new English theatre is of course encouraged by the clique that first helped his career [...] but in fact Osborne has simply given the techniques that he learned from Arthur Miller an English accent. His constant feuds with the critics and his pronouncements on national politics keep him in the public eye, but his influence today is negligible, and his best plays (*Luther*, *a Patriot for Me*) are naturalistic chronicles of historical figures.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> John Calder, 'La Jeune Literature Anglaise', Box 152, Folder: 'La Jeune Literature Anglaise', Calder & Boyars mss. pp. 1-2

In this extract Calder recalls the suspicion of social realist writing expressed by Gordon, paying particular attention to the exaltation of John Osborne's drama despite what Calder perceives as its derivative conservatism and wilful sensationalism. Crucially, whilst denouncing Osborne's positioning as "father figure of the new English theatre", Calder suggests Beckett as a more deserving bearer of that particular mantle. If Osborne's lack of influence is central to Calder's assertion, then it also provides his justification for selecting Beckett, suggesting in the next section the wide range of challenging writing that Beckett inspired. Calder credits Anthony Burgess with imagination, radicalism, expertise and capability, establishing benchmarks in a similar manner to Johnson in *Aren't You Rather Young* and, in another similarity, praising Burgess as a "devout Joycean".<sup>126</sup> Calder also praises Burgess for the manner in which "he has ably defended William Burroughs and other controversial modern writers from attack".<sup>127</sup>

Calder's description of a retaliation against social realist writing mirrors that of Gordon, as indeed does his selection of writers bearing Joycean and Beckettian influences. The second writer given significant credit in Calder's essay is Ann Quin, and the importance attributed to her in Chapter Two of this thesis is not only reinforced by Calder, but also directly connected by him to the *Nouveau Roman*:

Perhaps the most interesting new woman writer is Ann Quin, whose second novel *Three*, has not disappointed those critics who compared her to Beckett, Nathalie Sarraute and Graham Greene when her first novel *Berg* appeared [...] With Ann Quin the *Nouveau Roman* can be said to have established its first solid British beachhead, although she is typical of her generation in her subject matter.<sup>128</sup>

Calder makes clear his positioning of Quin as a British counterpart to the innovations of Sarraute and her *Nouveau Roman* contemporaries. Where other critics viewed the influence of French writing – evidenced in Miller's commentary – as a negative prospect for the future of English literature, Calder treats it as a significant positive. Gordon, too, recognised as much, describing Quin's *Berg* as a novel "quite unlike any other, which had absorbed the theatrical influences of John Osborne and employed the technical advances of the nouveau

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<sup>126</sup> John Calder, *op. cit.* p. 2

<sup>127</sup> John Calder, *op. cit.* p. 3

<sup>128</sup> John Calder, *op. cit.* p. 3

roman".<sup>129</sup> Though accepting that "critics are still in the main hostile to experiment and some puzzled readers are undoubtedly being lost",<sup>130</sup> Calder suggests that the younger generation of British writers "have lost their insular complacency, have become more aware of the world picture and are allowing themselves to be influenced by the best new writing from abroad".<sup>131</sup> That Quin is selected to demonstrate this particular trend lends support to Gordon's posthumous selection of her work for *Beyond the Words*, and indicates clear intention in Calder's criticism to bring such writers into close comparison with the *Nouveau Roman*.

As a critical contemporary to both the *Nouveau Roman* and *The New Fiction*, Calder's testimony is evidence that the retroactive comparisons made in this thesis are appropriate and relevant in their application. That is: these likenesses were apparent at the time. In addition to his criticism, Calder was responsible in a number of direct and practical ways for ensuring the influence of the *Nouveau Roman* was recognised alongside his public support for the young British writers of the period. In a 1960 letter to Tony Mayer, Calder details his plans to promote writing by the group referred to variously throughout as the "new French school" and the "new realist school",<sup>132</sup> making specific reference to Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras. Calder's letter petitions Mayer – as a representative of the French Embassy in London – to assist with this promotion:

I know that you personally do a great deal to make the English public aware of contemporary French music, and I wonder if the Embassy would now be interested in doing the same for the outstanding figures on the literary scene by arranging some kind of reception if I can persuade M. Robbe-Grillet or Madame Sarraute to come over [...] I am sure that I can arrange for a discussion programme on the Third, for the T.V. programmes dealing with books to discuss these authors and their works, and for the Literary Press to give some special attention to the new French novel.<sup>133</sup>

This extract demonstrates Calder's ambition to achieve widespread attention via television and press for his project promoting the imaginative and innovative French writers of the

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<sup>129</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. ix In: Ann Quin, *Berg* pp. i-xiv (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001)

<sup>130</sup> John Calder, *op. cit.* p. 4

<sup>131</sup> John Calder, *op. cit.* pp. 4-5

<sup>132</sup> John Calder, Letter to Tony Mayer, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1960, Box 54, Folder: French Week Correspondence, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>133</sup> John Calder, Letter to Tony Mayer, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1960



*Nouveau Roman*. Calder also adds an indication of his critical rationale, stating to Mayer his desire to remind the public that “Samuel Beckett is the link between PROUST and JOYCE on the one hand and the 'new French school' on the other”.<sup>134</sup> Once again citing Beckett, Calder presents the *Nouveau Roman* writers in an influential position in mid-twentieth century literature, identifying their new novel’s radicalism in relation to their nineteenth century predecessors, their extension and progression on the innovations of Joyce and Beckett, and most significantly of all, their importance to a younger generation of challenging British writers.

## 2.8 Summary

Calder’s frequent comparisons between established French innovators and their upstart British counterparts provide a number of conclusions to the discussion presented in this chapter. The New Fiction, like the *Nouveau Roman*, emerges from a position of critical opposition to a well-established model for realist writing, offering new interpretations and new approaches to represent an experiential reality. Again like the *Nouveau Roman*, The New Fiction faced challenges and scepticism, the labels of avant-gardism and experimentalism giving a broadly conservative critical field the opportunity to dismiss or diminish their achievements. Through Calder, it is known that The New Fiction emerges from a deliberate effort to draw parallels between the two groups, at the hands of a publisher keen to place those younger authors at the forefront of a vibrant literary-critical scene emergent from across the Channel.

The determination to represent the real whilst rejecting accepted models of literary realism is also reflected in Johnson’s positioning of his own writing – and the hypothetical new writing which he and Gordon encourage – as specifically post-Joycean, and informed by the broader goals of literary Modernism. Identifying Johnson’s and Gordon’s groundwork as a continuation of modernist techniques into the later twentieth century, yet still serving the purpose of realism, assigns the New Fiction a significance which warrants close critical attention. That the deaths of Johnson and Quin and the emigration of Burns appear to have halted the New Fiction’s progress at a very early stage does not absolve us of the need to examine the extant body of writing created in this post-Joycean context. Crucially, while the

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

routine identification of New Fiction writing as experimental in nature amply recognises the range of formal and linguistic devices employed by these authors, the combination of both the *nouveau roman* and Modernism, contrasted against earlier realism, provides a clearer critical trajectory with which this writing can be associated. The New Fiction appears less of an outlier when viewed as a wilful continuation of Modernism, and a counterpart to the *Nouveau Roman* to reconfigure the realistic qualities of the novel. Even when only applied retrospectively as an identification of methodological similarities, it becomes harder still to dismiss the New Fiction as an anomalous fringe group.

In the following chapters, two New Fiction authors are selected for close reading, both of whom have returned to regular publication since the turn of the twenty first century, and both of whom are exemplary of the principles described by Johnson's and Gordon's New Fiction. The first, Johnson himself, is selected primarily owing to his centrality to the group. Set against the context of literary realism, Modernism and the *Nouveau Roman*, The New Fiction provides a critical and contextual lens through which to read Johnson's work within a clear trajectory of literary innovation, and employing various reading foci tailored to his stated authorial goals. Additionally, the revival of interest in his writing suggests the possibility of reading Johnson from a contemporary perspective as an author whose creative works and critical ideas continue to stimulate enthusiastic responses amongst current readership. The second writer is Quin, selected partly due to the importance placed on her by Gordon and Calder, but also due to the contrasting lack of primary critical writing, either within *Beyond the Words* or elsewhere. Whilst material representing Johnson's criticism is present in Gordon's anthology, Quin's voice is lacking, and the focus on her work is thus intended to more strongly connect Quin's writing to the broader New Fiction project. Although considerably less well known than Johnson, Quin's serves as an exemplar for the innovative British writing of the period in which this New Fiction is situated.

## Chapter 3: B.S. Johnson and The New Fiction

### 3.1 Introduction and Critical Overview

As one of the founding figures at the core of The New Fiction, B.S. Johnson has a central role in establishing the critical basis behind this particular brand of innovative writing in late twentieth-century Britain. This chapter introduces the ways in which the formal and stylistic practices of Johnson's novels demonstrate and reinforce the arguments of The New Fiction – primarily Johnson's own, but also including those of Gordon and the various contributors to *Beyond the Words* – and in doing so asserts Johnson's position at the head of a community of innovative British writers. As is also true of the discussion of Ann Quin's work in Chapter 4 of this thesis, The New Fiction provides the critical and historical context which makes this reading viable.

There are evident difficulties in providing critical context to Johnson's works, present in the body of pre-millennial criticism, despite the range of criticism on Johnson's novels published since 2001.<sup>1</sup> A central characteristic throughout critical studies of Johnson is the portrayal of a writer longing to access a wide mainstream readership. As Coe explains in his introduction to the 1999 edition of *The Unfortunates*, Johnson's inventive approach to writing was not born of a desire to be different: "'The mainstream' [...] was exactly where he wanted to be: but a mainstream defined according to his own terms".<sup>2</sup> Both Johnson and Gordon assert that the perceived inaccessibility of experimental writing must be eliminated, and their New Fiction supersedes the experimental label by relating their formal unorthodoxy to the changing historical and cultural roles of the novel. To this end, Gordon argues that "a novel which with skill portrays its author's individual contemporary vision cannot be experimental or avant garde. It can only be itself, a work of fiction".<sup>3</sup> In these terms, the visual and formal innovation achieved by writers such as Johnson need not in principle be a barrier to mainstream readers of fiction, and ought to avoid accusations of deliberate obscurity implied by the description of a work as experimental. In *Aren't You Rather Young*, Johnson condemns the experimental label, highlighting the damage it has caused to his own ambitions to be widely read and appreciated:

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'Introduction' p. vii In: B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: New Directions, 1999) pp. v-xv

<sup>3</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. 15 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975) pp. 9-15

What I have been trying to do in the novel form has been too much refracted through the conservativeness of reviewers and others; the reasons why I have written in the ways that I have done have become lost, have never reached as many people, nor in anything like a definitive form.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson goes further, suggesting not only that the term 'experimental' is a heavy-handed and inappropriate application of conservatism to his work, but that his writing is, despite his visually and formally inventive approach, quite explicitly *not experimental*. As Joebear Webb indicates in *Like a Fiery Elephant*, this specific issue was a frequent target of Johnson's frustration:

He once said to me his famous thing about experimental writing: he got very angry and said, 'I make experiments but I don't show them to anybody', and so on, as if to say, What were his critics talking about? He was still very angry about it afterwards, stressing it was *not* experimental writing: that was something else, these words, strange little words like imagination and experimental, they were like red rags to him.<sup>5</sup>

Webb indicates the clear lines Johnson draws between making experiments as part of one's writing process and defining works of experimental writing, consistent with Johnson's argument that an unsuccessful experiment is "hidden away", and a published work contains not experiments, but successes.<sup>6</sup> Johnson claims that by virtue of being the result of a successful experiment, his published works cannot be justifiably identified to be 'experimental', but are instead innovative contributions to mainstream contemporary British literature.

Across the entire range of critical studies of Johnson, this barrier to the mainstream acceptance that Johnson craved continues to exist. The pages of the 1999 edition of *The Unfortunates* bear a covering wrapper which states Johnson to be: "an experimental novelist",<sup>7</sup> and Francis Booth claims that "Unlike most of the other authors of the time, he

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<sup>4</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 19

<sup>5</sup> Joebear Webb, in Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004) p. 397

<sup>6</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 19

<sup>7</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* covering wrapper, 1999 edition

consciously labelled his work ‘experimental’”<sup>8</sup> despite evidence from *Aren’t You Rather Young* demonstrating that quite the opposite was in fact the case. Although *Like a Fiery Elephant* is reasonably consistent in avoiding the ‘experimental’ label, Coe instead frequently adopts the term ‘avant-garde’ which, as indicated by Gordon in *Beyond the Words*, is equally complicit in ensuring a view of such writing as niche, rather than ambitious and serious work seeking a mainstream audience. During his introduction to *Like a Fiery Elephant*, Coe states the following:

B.S. Johnson was, if you like, Britain’s one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s. Yes, of course there were other avant-garde writers around at this the time [...] But they were not as famous as he was, they were not as good at putting their names about.<sup>9</sup>

While it is indeed true that Johnson was, and remains, by far the best-known of the young generation of New Fiction Writers, to establish Johnson as a *one-man* avant-garde so firmly is to reject the notion that he had colleagues, collaborators and sympathisers amongst his peers. By contrast, Gordon’s *Beyond the Words* places Johnson firmly amongst a community of like-minded, innovative writers, and it is within this community that an alternative context for Johnson’s writing is found, which more directly considers the range of serious literary activities implied by the ‘experimental’ label, far beyond a flippant disregard for tradition.

The most recent of commentaries on Johnson’s writing have softened their application of the ‘experimental’ tag. The introductions to *Well Done God!* form a compelling argument for Johnson’s unique position as an innovative artist across multiple media and, crucially, define Johnson as an “avant-garde and committedly ‘experimental’ writer”.<sup>10</sup> Tew’s use of inverted commas diminishes his use of the term, and although the phrase “avant-garde” continues to imply a degree of otherness, Tew’s phrasing appears in line with the proposed separation between the experimental *writer* and experimental *writing*. In his introduction to

<sup>8</sup> Francis Booth, ‘B.S. Johnson’ p. 392 In: Francis Booth, *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1950-1980* (Francis Booth, 2012) pp. 392-435

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Philip Tew, ‘Prologue’ p. xxv In: B.S. Johnson, and Jonathan Coe, Julia Jordan and Philip Tew (eds.), *Well Done God!: Collected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. xxi-xxv

the 2013 republication of *House Mother Normal*, Andrew Motion similarly retains “experimental” as an identifier, but demonstrates its weakness:

People who say they know nothing about B.S. Johnson usually turn out to know two things about him: that he wrote experimental books, and that he killed himself. Both are true, but both are misleading about his qualities and character as a writer.<sup>11</sup>

Again similarly, Julia Jordan describes Johnson’s writing to be “experimentally radical”, and to hold a “largely avant-garde concern”,<sup>12</sup> but affirms Johnson’s radicalism to be born of ideological necessity rather than the contrived gimmickry with which Johnson associated these terms. Jordan draws on Johnson’s assertions that his formal innovations are never without a firm logical and technical rationale:

Johnson’s formal experimentation could be described as a sort of typographical sensationalism, but was distinguished in every instance by his conviction that each represented a wholly justifiable and necessary response to a particular problem he had perceived.<sup>13</sup>

Although providing convenient descriptors of Johnson’s innovative approach to the novel, the terms “experimental” and “avant-garde” were explicitly rejected by The New Fiction for two specific reasons: they represented a barrier to the widespread acceptance of a progressive approach to writing, and they obscured the methodical, functional approach taken to the novel form. Newer critical readings of Johnson demonstrate an awareness of the weaknesses of this labelling, hedging its use to refer to Johnson’s writing methodology rather than to characterise and categorise the resultant works as if experimentation were an end in itself.

Johnson’s own assertions about the future of the novel are prevalent throughout *Aren’t You Rather Young*, and built upon by Gordon et al. in *Beyond the Words*.<sup>14</sup> The interviews with Johnson’s peers featured in Coe’s *Like a Fiery Elephant*, however, reveal the all-permeating nature of his views, and the distance placed between Johnson and the notion of explicitly experimental writing. Alan Burns reflects upon Johnson’s desire for wider

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Motion, ‘Introduction’ p. v In: B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. v-ix

<sup>12</sup> Julia Jordan, *Chance in the Modern British Novel: From Henry Green to Iris Murdoch* (London: Continuum, 2010) p. 102

<sup>13</sup> Julia Jordan, *op. cit.* p. 103

<sup>14</sup> As detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

mainstream recognition, describing Johnson's "feeling of not getting fully what he deserved",<sup>15</sup> whilst John Berger outlines an "injustice in relation to what [Johnson] was trying to do and what he had achieved".<sup>16</sup> The impression given through statements such as these is of a writer who refused to be confined to the dark niches of a counter-cultural avant-garde. Instead, Johnson argued that the 'newness' of his writing ought to be making a lasting impact on mainstream contemporary novel-writing, a genuine innovation for the form as a whole. It is in this characteristic that a more appropriate descriptor for Johnson's works may be found. The forewords for each of the 2013 reissues of *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl*, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* state, identically, that Johnson was "a novelist whose works combine verbal inventiveness and typographical innovations".<sup>17</sup> The language of invention and innovation in this instance avoids the uncomfortable categorisation of 'experimental writing', by instead placing focus on the newness and practicality of Johnson's texts. The terms 'innovation' and 'invention' appear more sympathetic to Johnson's own assertions for a focus on the recognition of form, media and the technology of print, and indeed of the logical solving of problems undertaken in his writing. Even more directly, Gordon provides the simple label which signifies the development of a fresh approach to authorship built on Johnson's ideals – a New Fiction.

The New Fiction provides the means to formulate a critical reading of Johnson's work without relying fully on the terminology of the experimental and the avant-garde. Incorporating Johnson's rejection of these terms, it instead focuses on practical innovations and areas of thematic focus in the works it describes. The combination of *Aren't You Rather Young* and *Beyond the Words* also provides a lens by which Johnson may be critically read and contextualised, revealing both the weaknesses in accepting readings and comparisons based solely on a generic experimentalism, and the strengths in situating Johnson at the core of an innovative literary group.

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Burns, in Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* p. 392

<sup>16</sup> John Berger, in Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* p.393

<sup>17</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo; Trawl; House Mother Normal; Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (All: London: Picador, 2013) editorial foreword

### 3.2 *Albert Angelo* (1964)

Johnson's career as a novelist began with *Travelling People* (1963), yet he would subsequently come to express a sense of shame about it, declaring in *Aren't You Rather Young?* that "since *Travelling People* is part truth and part fiction it now embarrasses me and I will not allow it to be reprinted; though I am still pleased that its devices work".<sup>18</sup> It is partly for this reason that *Albert Angelo*, Johnson's second novel, becomes the first representative example in this thesis of Johnson's writing aesthetic. More significantly however, Johnson himself indicates that *Albert Angelo* marks the point at which he began to succeed in his ambitious literary goals: "I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* [...] to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form".<sup>19</sup> The combination of critical arguments summarised by *The New Fiction* – including Johnson's own – provides the means to identify the logical rationale behind Johnson's technical and aesthetic decisions.

Considering the profound effect Johnson's essay had upon Gordon's *Beyond the Words*, it is by association that *Albert Angelo* may be retroactively highlighted as a significant step towards describing *The New Fiction* in terms of the fiction it produced. In particular, Johnson emphasises the significance of this novel in combating the inherent dishonesty of formulaic writing models, and it is in these terms that a reading of *Albert Angelo* is best begun. Johnson's call for writers to focus on the content of their own minds is directly represented in *Albert Angelo* – a predominantly autobiographical novel about an aspiring architect, forced to make ends meet as a downtrodden supply teacher in central London. As will become clear, in choosing to emphasise a kind of representative truth, Johnson adopts a range of formal styles and an inventive approach to language, typography and visual design which develops throughout the novel into an eventual circumvention or abandonment of the novel's own storytelling priorities. In emphasising the practical and technical justification behind his unusual appropriations of style and form, Johnson urges a reading of his work which utilises the critical arguments posed throughout *Aren't You Rather*

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<sup>18</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 22

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



*Young*, and the critical contexts which underpin the reading of the New Fiction build upon this reasoning.

Revisiting Johnson's own selective criteria for the evolution of the novel ("the precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book, the explication of thought"<sup>20</sup>), *Albert Angelo* appears to embody much of his progressive endeavour. As a text shifting rapidly between multiple written styles, each of Johnson's tenets is represented at various points in *Albert Angelo*. Albert himself is introduced during the first of the text's five parts, Prologue, during a conversation with his new flatmates in which he states "I'm an architect – that is, I'm a teacher really, but I want to be an architect. No that's the wrong way round, I'm an architect, but I have to earn my living by teaching".<sup>21</sup> Presented similarly to dramatic script, the initial impression offered comes in a form of free direct speech (though not in its freest form, because reporting clauses are present), and quickly builds a portrait of an idealistic but defensive figure confronted by a certain degree of cynicism:

*Albert said:* I do it for its own sake. You have to do something for its own sake.  
*Luke said:* Won't anyone ever build your buildings, then?  
*Albert said:* Oh yes, one day they'll all be built, I know.  
*Joseph said:* When you're dead, like.  
*Luke said:* Like poets, after they're dead.  
*Albert said:* Like poets, just.  
*Luke said:* Fucking lot of good that is, mate. I mean, when you're dead you're fucking dead, aren't you?  
*Albert said:* No.

22

Albert is introduced through a dialogue form adapted from dramatic script – a reference to the theatrical in keeping with the ethos of "borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media".<sup>23</sup> Johnson's inclination to utilise forms taken from outside the typically novelistic is itself representative of Johnson's own departure from convention, but also the broader intentions of The New Fiction to demonstrate the novel's ability to adapt, reflect and evolve in accordance with other media. Here, Johnson's appropriation of form is presented firmly within the context of the prose novel, with some variation. It resembles the dramatic form, bearing the name of each speaker and lacking quotation marks, but Johnson's form also

<sup>20</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 12

<sup>21</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Picador, 2013) p. 12

<sup>22</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit* p. 13

<sup>23</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 16

includes the reporting clause 'said' which is more recognisably native to the representation of speech in prose narrative. In adapting the form in this manner, Johnson exhibits what White describes as follows:

[*Albert Angelo*] challenges the reader's interpretive abilities. The adaptations of the text to its varying tasks demand that the reader adapt, in turn, to them. The reader of *Albert Angelo* has to think on his or her feet in order to negotiate its devices.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of Johnson's devices being tuned to serve specific tasks recalls Johnson's own emphasis on the importance of functionality; that his devices warrant appraisal in terms of how successfully they fulfil their purpose. Furthermore, it mirrors Gordon's emphasis on the need for an engaged, participatory readership intrigued by "sentences, paragraphs, pages as sounds, shapes, rhythms" peculiar and particular to the author.

In the passage of more traditional prose which follows, the reader's anticipated reliance upon a traditional model of characterisation is again disrupted, as Johnson's narrator quickly moves to draw attention to the artificiality of the coincidental meeting which he, as author, has crafted:

The previous tenant was named Graham. Joseph lived underneath, in the basement, of twenty-nine Percy Circus. Albert had a bathroom, a lavatory, and a kitchen in common with Joseph. Luke was a friend to Joseph, who happened to be visiting him at the time that the conversation already related took place. Joseph had oh many other friends, but on this particular occasion it happened to be Luke who happened to be visiting Joseph on the first evening of Albert's tenure of the room in Percy Circus. On the very special occasion of Albert's coming to number twenty-nine it happened to be Luke: Luke, to give him a name pregnant with significance.

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Even at this early stage Johnson unsettles the reliability of fundamental novelistic signs such as character and setting, by openly indicating to his reader that authorial decisions, such as the activity of giving him a name or the repetition of circumstances which "happened to be",

<sup>24</sup> Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface* p. 95

<sup>25</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* p. 14

are aspects of a fictitious (and in Johnson's terms deceitful) craft. Johnson's reiteration of circumstantial detail from "Albert's tenure of the room" to "Albert's coming to number twenty-nine", and the explication of the authorial selection of the name Luke, signal an author who retains an active, participatory role within the narrative of his text. Ronald Hayman asserts in his characterisation of Ann Quin, in *The Novel Today*, that "Ann Quin resembled B.S. Johnson in wanting to include herself in the story".<sup>26</sup> Autobiographical elements like Quin's Catholic school upbringing, bisexuality, and drug use, and Johnson's journalism, personal and romantic relationships, and socialism routinely appear to inform both author's protagonists. For Johnson, the device of 'including himself' ensures that his vision for the form and function of a novel retains a constant presence within his writing sometime before this was ultimately expressed in *Aren't You Rather Young*.

Johnson's precision of language is perhaps most evident during the lengthy descriptive passages which characterise the second section of *Albert Angelo*, entitled Exposition. During his walks through London we are introduced to Albert the architect, his passions permeating his thoughts with descriptions that speak of appreciation and expertise:

The sun on St. Paul's Hammersmith lifts me. Its proportions are miraculous, miraculous. Who did it...Gough, yes, Gough and Roumieu, and someone else. Forget the other. My first real isometric drawing was of St. Pauls. My first real. Miraculous. And my parents (whatever that may mean) were married there, at St. Paul's. The flyover, Hammersmith flyover, too, pleases me. It sets off the church, is a fine piece of architecture itself. Graceful, curving away as though on tiptoe. But the sun emphasises which is the better.<sup>27</sup>

Free direct thought passages such as this highlight the element of Albert's character introduced early in Prologue. He is a would-be architect forced to make his living as a teacher. Moreover, these first-person descriptive sections, using elliptical grammar, demonstrate an application of architectural terminology, aesthetics and historical knowledge. Specific architects – Gough, Roumieu – are mentioned by name, whilst references to 'setting off' and isometric drawing highlight an overall tone for Albert's first-person descriptive style. There is an architect's aesthetic in the manner in which Albert

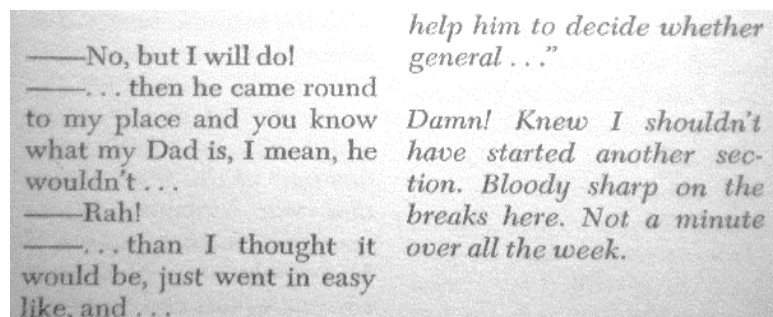
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<sup>26</sup> Ronald Hayman, *The Novel Today, 1967-1975* (London: Longman, 1976) p. 9

<sup>27</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* pp. 20-1

relates to the environment around him, an appreciation of form and function which goes beyond merely the descriptive. If one of Johnson's central goals was indeed to emphasise the novel's capability for "taking an audience inside characters' minds, at telling it what people are thinking",<sup>28</sup> the specific modes of narration and selective language drawn from architecture serve as a useful example of Albert's idiosyncratic view of his world.

The third section of *Albert Angelo*, titled 'Development', presents Albert the teacher in a layout of two columns, the left bearing what is spoken aloud in the classroom by Albert and his pupils, and the right indicating thoughts taking place in Albert's mind throughout the lesson. In quiet moments, Albert's thoughts are interrupted by particularly unruly members of the class, for example whilst reading what appears to be a textbook on architecture:



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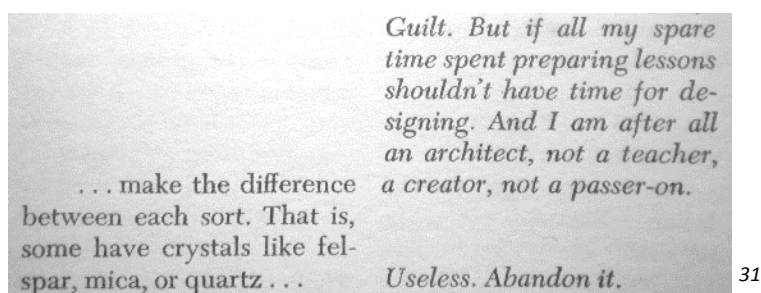
Indicating again Johnson's focus on presenting the internal lives of his characters, this form enacts the conflict taking place between Albert's passions and his daily life. In this extract, free direct thought is represented in the italicised right-hand column: Albert's internal monologue, including passages of text which he is privately reading. The free direct speech presented in the left-hand column represents that which is spoken aloud in the classroom, this particular extract containing various interruptions from Albert's pupils. The conflict between the two is not just a product of Johnson's narrative, but through his arrangement of form, columns of text separated spatially as Albert's focus shifts between the internal and the external. Crucially, the device here operates as another useful demonstration of the combined critical context which can be brought to the text in support of Johnson's own explanations. White, for instance, states that "we can identify the defamiliarisation of conventional mimesis, but these graphic devices go further than that, seeking to explore a

<sup>28</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 12

<sup>29</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* p. 68

new, more ambitious level of mimesis”.<sup>30</sup> The need for such a reconstitution of mimetic practice is clarified by the New Fiction’s criticism of realism as a poor reflection of reality. It is further supported by Shlovsky’s assertion that to draw attention to the artificiality of the device is to avoid the general and the automatic, and to create the particularised experiential truth Johnson aims for.

Confronted by an uninterested room of pupils, Albert’s mind drifts between the teaching of basic geology, pained recollections of a past love, the frustrations of teaching itself, and of course to architecture. In the extract which follows, the grammatical difference between what Albert says and what he thinks is made even clearer, the speech maintaining the expected instructive tone of a teacher whilst the interior monologue routinely omits the first-person “I”, reducing these sections of narrative to a series of statements:



Separation is again created between Albert’s outward and inward mannerisms. In speech, and particularly in the classroom setting, Albert is formal and instructive, the children disruptive and chaotic. In thought, Albert presents a mixture of disinterest, annoyance, and guilt over his failures at *being* a teacher, and these failures are reinforced by Johnson’s stylistic devices. The removal of the “I” from statements such as “but if all my spare time spent preparing lessons shouldn’t have time for designing” refuses to situate Albert himself as subject, disconnected from his own first-person narration. The desire to *be* an architect is reinforced by the return of the first person “I” to the subject of the sentence in “I am after all an architect”, restoring ownership to Albert’s sense of being. The Albert who walks the streets of London considering his architectural appreciation of his city appears to be content and resolved within a single narrative form which is both descriptive of his location and representative of his character. Johnson presents the Albert of the classroom as a fracturing into two halves, in which architect and teacher battle for prime narrative focus.

<sup>30</sup> Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface* p. 97

<sup>31</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 78

Further examination of *Aren't You Rather Young* reveals that the choice of Albert's profession is more than arbitrary, serving not only to contrast the passions of Johnson's central character in conflict with his day-to-day working life, but also to highlight Johnson's own continuing engagement with the novel in relation to other disciplines:

The architects can teach us something: their aesthetic problems are combined with functional ones in a way that dramatizes the crucial nature of their final actions [...] Subject matter is everywhere, general, is brick, concrete, plastic; the ways of putting it together are particular, are crucial. But I recognise that there are not simply problems of form, but problems of writing. Form is not the aim, but the result.<sup>32</sup>

One can read in *Albert Angelo* the combination of aesthetic and functional problems described, and in doing so continue to combat accusations of gimmickry or flippancy levelled at Johnson's writing. The creation of unusual novelistic forms is not the *aim* but the *result* of his aims; Johnson presents his novel in a manner appropriate to resolving the aesthetic and functional problems raised by his subject matter. In terms of the precision of language, Johnson adopts specific terminologies and formal styles in the presentation of thought and dialogue which represent the internal and external characteristics of the eponymous Albert simultaneously. Examining the relationship between Johnson's writing in *Albert Angelo* and his essay for *Aren't You Rather Young* reveals the critical basis of Johnson's and Gordon's New Fiction put into practice, as an aspect of novelistic craft.

As has been indicated, *Albert Angelo* features the presentation of various dialogue forms, ranging from a variation on dramatic script in Albert's interactions with his flatmates, to the more unorthodox layout of columns and selective italicisation which lays his internal monologue side-by-side with dialogue and interactions with his pupils. This compound approach to textual layout provides the specific, practical means by which the conflicts of language inherent to the character of Albert can be explored, and Johnson's principle of borrowing and adopting forms from other media, as evidenced by his modified script, can be similarly expanded beyond simply an identification of form into narrative interpretation. Johnson's acts of aesthetic and functional problem solving become even more apparent when shifting focus onto another of his tenets for the future evolution of the novel – the

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<sup>32</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 16

possibilities of form and function implied by the exploitation of the technological fact of the book.

Alongside the linguistic and stylistic devices which Johnson deploys in *Albert Angelo* comes an even wider range of explorations of form. Again, each represents a distinct authorial problem which, as Johnson explains, provides logical rationale for the unorthodox formal presentation of the text. Johnson describes these devices as being “used to solve problems which I felt could not be dealt with in other ways”.<sup>33</sup> When Albert, for example, stumbles across a flyer for a “spiritualist reader and devine [sic] healer” by the name of Madam Mae, the flyer itself is reproduced as an image on the page rather than simply a written-out representation of its content. As Johnson explains, “when Albert finds a fortuneteller’s card in the street it is further from the truth to describe it than to simply reproduce it”.<sup>34</sup> Retaining the argument about experiential truth, Johnson’s commentary in *Aren’t You Rather Young* reveals once again that the aesthetic, formal decision to reproduce the card is more than an arbitrary or experimental quirk of presentation. The fortune-teller’s card is more than simply an illustration; it is a small, self-contained text in its own right, separated and delineated from the main body of text on the page surface. Johnson aims to present a truthful impression of unexpected discovery, disrupting the textual form. It is the technology of the printed book which allows the reproduction to take place, but also which demonstrates the artificiality of its inclusion – each side of the card is centred as an image on each page of a double-page spread, rather than as opposite sides of a single leaf, and is devoid of the described colour. It is, as an artefact, condensed and altered for reproduction within the text in this way – adapted, rather than accurately reproduced. Nevertheless, in Johnson’s terms, perhaps this is closer to the truth; it is problematic in a manner similar to the deceit Johnson identifies in the telling of stories, seemingly accurate in all its detail, and yet through mediation, impossibly limited by comparison to the real experience.

The formal element of *Albert Angelo* which attracts by far the most attention amongst critical readers of Johnson is the decision to cut a small window through pages 149-52. Through the opening, the words of page 153 may be read: “struggled to take back his knife, and inflicted on him a mortal wound above his right eye (the blade penetrating to a depth of

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<sup>33</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 22

<sup>34</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 23

two inches) from which he died instantly”.<sup>35</sup> The passage in question – three lines of text describing a violent scene culminating in a fatal stabbing – is in every sense an act of foreshadowing. Upon reaching the page on which the text is printed, it is revealed to be a description of the death of Christopher Marlowe. However, the constraint of the narrow window cut through the preceding pages initially prevents one from reading this particular point contextually. As such, the displacement of text from context potentially either allows the reader to envisage this scene as a premonition of Albert’s death, or to at least connect an upcoming narrative event with the death of Marlowe. The text on page 151 provides an alternative context, a ‘scuffle’ witnessed by Albert and his friend Terry which if one includes the text through the window, culminates in a murder, here reading “Terry struggled to take back his knife”.<sup>36</sup> The next turn of the page reveals this not to be the case, following onto page 152 to instead read “Terry just stepped out in front of her, and looked down at her. She apologised! Terry stepped back. Terry really rather magnificent the whole evening. Told to move on by two highup police in car”.<sup>37</sup> The hole through pages 149-52 is a device literally recurrent across several pages, each providing an alternative reading of the narrative disruption which it causes.

The cutting away of the page surface is identified by many as a sign of Johnson’s experimentalism. Randall Stevenson for example states that “serial form is perhaps most radically undermined by B.S. Johnson, the most enthusiastically experimental of recent British writers”,<sup>38</sup> whilst Coe declares *Albert Angelo* to be “even more ‘experimental’ in form than *Travelling People*, contain[ing] some of Johnson’s most ingenious devices”.<sup>39</sup> With this particular device, Johnson’s reader repeatedly re-imagines the events which contextualise the glimpsed premonition, and in doing so enacts the conflict between the known and the unknown:

When a future event must be revealed, I could (and can; can you?) think of no way nearer to the truth and more effective than to cut a section through those pages

<sup>35</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* p. 153

<sup>36</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 151/153

<sup>37</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* pp. 151-2

<sup>38</sup> Randall Stevenson, *A Reader’s Guide to The Twentieth-Century Novel in Britain* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993) p. 112

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* p. 18



intervening so that the event may be read in its place but before the reader reaches that place.<sup>40</sup>

It is made clear in *Aren't You Rather Young?* that there is a specific technical rationale behind Johnson's employment of such an explicitly physical formal device – a product of experimentation indeed, but rendered a success by the achievement of new reading possibilities. Such intentions continue to exemplify The New Fiction position as a whole, mirroring for example Gordon's assertion that "content and form in fiction are inseparable, both essential aspects of a single artefact".<sup>41</sup> It is, to reiterate, in these circumstances which The New Fiction rejects the label of experimentalism; Johnson's unusual applications of form have passed through the stage of experimental testing, and become new contributions to knowledge on the capabilities of print – innovations, rather than experiments.

The range of interpretive possibilities raised through Johnson's paper window is resolved in the novel's final section, Coda, in which Albert is accosted by a group of his former pupils identifiable from the idiosyncrasies of their speech. The accusation of belittling 'ma famly' and the use of the relational deictic noun 'Sir' recur as Albert is killed in a flippant, dispassionate manner, and dumped into a canal:

"Right! – One! Two!        Three!  
 "Ma!Fam! Leeeeeeee!"  
 "Ouuuugh!"  
 "United by the Queen, the bastard!"  
 "Sir! Sir!        Sir!"  
 "Right!– Up!"  
 "And over!"  
 "'E'll roll, all right, fatarse Albert".  
 Hardly a splash.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst pains are taken to establish the fracturing and multiplicity at work within the character of Albert in a manner true to Johnson's exploration of an experiential truth, Albert's death is presented so simply as to seem inconsequential. The omission of the subject and verb from the narration "hardly a splash" mean that Albert is rendered as a stylistic non-presence in the sentence which describes his murder – no longer alive, he also no longer even occupies his narrative role. Albert's attempts to resolve his inner conflicts go

<sup>40</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 23

<sup>41</sup> Giles Gordon, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975) p. 15

<sup>42</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* pp. 179-80

to waste, undone by the rash acts of a band of murderous children – and indeed of an author dissatisfied with his fictionality. This time through grammatical construction, Johnson draws attention to his own authorial decision to create and subsequently destroy a fictional character. The effect is partially achieved through narrative, but is greatly exaggerated by the stylistic device, clearly employed to achieve the specific aim of simultaneously killing Johnson's protagonist and eradicating the very notion of the protagonist itself.

Perhaps the strongest link between *Albert Angelo* and the critical writing belonging to The New Fiction comes in its penultimate section, Disintegration, particularly when viewed through the lens of Johnson's third principle for the progressive development of the modern novel, the explication of thought. Toby Litt's introduction to the 2013 edition of *Albert Angelo* begins by stating "There's a shock coming up. A big, glorious, true shock. It's at the bottom of page 163"<sup>43</sup>, whilst Nicolas Tredell describes an "abrupt fracture" and a "dramatic exclamation".<sup>44</sup> The last line of Development introduces the great, fracturing shock which Litt and Tredell refer to:

Part of the trouble, he thought, was that he lived and loved to live in an area of absolute architectural rightness, which inhibited his own originality, and resulted in him being--- OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!<sup>45</sup>

Abandoning all pretence of sustaining the narrative of Albert, the Londoner, the architect or the teacher, Johnson shifts from free indirect discourse into a first-person, free direct mode constituting a lengthy, impassioned and frenetic outburst on the constraints and limitations of Albert, the fictional character:

---fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending i can say

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<sup>43</sup> Toby Litt, 'Introduction' p. v In: B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. v-ix

<sup>44</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2010 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) p. 50

<sup>45</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* p. 163

anything through him that is anything that i would be  
interested in saying<sup>46</sup>

Implicitly addressed to the reader, and presenting the conflict of using the character as a proxy for himself and a means through which to 'say something', Johnson's narration deliberately and aggressively exposes the artifice of writing practice. Establishing a new narrative position occupied apparently by the author, the novel is established to be discursive of the writing practices which produced it, and the "covering up" and "pretending" which is required to envelop such discussions in layers of fiction, metaphor and allegory. Yet even in this Johnson remains in line with the literary goals on which *The New Fiction* places such importance: by again dashing the conventions of formal, narrative consistency, he continues to devise formal and stylistic devices which resolve the very conflicts which his narrative describes. Moving through various novelistic conventions, including those of narrative, characterisation, and the appropriation of factual events, Johnson includes within *Albert Angelo* a body of writing which tells the reader directly and forcefully that "telling stories is telling lies"<sup>47</sup>:

---A few instances of the lies. It was Jim Wales not Wells kept the greyhounds; my parents used to live in Hammersmith but now live in Barnes; the Little Heathens I pinched from my father [...] even Littlewoods I changed to Woolworths; and... I could go on and on, through each page, page after page, pointing out the lies, the lies, but it would be so tedious, so tedious.<sup>48</sup>

Though appearing trivial, the 'lies' which Johnson exposes in this passage reveal the extent to which a distinctly authorial (and thus in Johnson's terms dishonest) presence is sustained throughout. The repetitions in the narrative voice, themselves a clear conceit, enact for the reader a consistent wearing-down of the sustainability of fiction through the accumulation of minor lies; the telling of stories is not undone by a single fiction-shattering moment, but a steady accretion of mundane and 'tedious' dishonesties. As indicated by Tredell, the understanding of 'Disintegration' as a breakdown of the illusion of fiction is "a typical

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<sup>46</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 167

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 173

response”<sup>49</sup> to the closing sections of Johnson’s text – but it is arguably one which fails to account for the inconsistencies of form, style and indeed authorial presence which permeate the text as a whole. However the importance placed on *Albert Angelo* in *Aren’t You Rather Young* (“I really discovered what I should be doing”) invites the comparison of Johnson’s expressed views with those contained in this final section of the novel, and proves fruitful in linking Johnson’s ideas of form and the role of the author to the devices by which they are presented. By leading the reader through the falsities of his own fiction, Johnson continues to perform an activity which he describes in *Aren’t You Rather Young* to be necessarily novelistic: the explication of thought. Within the context of The New Fiction, which places such primacy on *Aren’t You Rather Young*, the great success which Johnson attributes to *Albert Angelo* is the manner in which it *sustains* Johnson’s novelistic ideologies; consistency, despite its radical and apparently disruptive treatment of literary convention. The “big, glorious true shock” which Litt describes appears instead quite the opposite: a consistent and comprehensive enactment of his critical principles in the form, language and style of his writing. Although certainly highlighted by Johnson himself as his first successful venture into this new critical approach to the writing of fiction, *Albert Angelo* is by no means an isolated example.

### 3.3 *The Unfortunates* (1969)

Johnson’s discussion of the formal and technical devices deployed throughout his body of work touches upon all six of the novels published during his lifetime (*See the Old Lady Decently* would not be published until 1975, two years after his death). Each text, however, is discussed relatively briefly with the exception of the 1969 novel *The Unfortunates*, Johnson’s most radical treatment of the novel form. More than two pages of Johnson’s essay explain the formal decision to present *The Unfortunates* as a collection of separate chapters, boxed but unbound, to be read at random. Johnson’s extended focus on the technology of print makes *The Unfortunates* a further example of Johnson’s enactment of The New Fiction’s ideals.

The individual chapters of *The Unfortunates* range in length between a single paragraph to sections of up to sixteen pages. An introductory note instructs the reader that

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<sup>49</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* p. 50

“apart from the first and last sections (which are marked as such) the other twenty-five sections are intended to be read in random order”.<sup>50</sup> Whilst *Albert Angelo* drifts between a range of devices, Johnson explains that the form of *The Unfortunates* is chosen to achieve a kind of randomness, representative of his own experiences of memory and the loss of his close friend Tony. Specifically, Johnson refers to this particular device as “a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer”.<sup>51</sup> The book-in-a-box format is further described in the Coe introduction thus:

Memories of Tony were unfolding, certainly, but not in a structured, linear way, and they were interrupted at random by the action on the pitch and his attempts to start writing his match report. It was this randomness, this lack of structure in the way we remember things and receive impressions, that Johnson wanted to record with absolute fidelity.<sup>52</sup>

The sense of fidelity to life as it is lived which Coe describes is drawn directly from Johnson’s commentary in *Aren’t You Rather Young?*, once again reinforcing a view of his unorthodox formal presentation as not an ‘experiment’ but a functional device, affording the same level of technical and logical rationale to the novel’s form as to Johnson’s controlled use of language. Furthermore, this aspect of Johnson’s rationale once again bears connections to other writers of The New Fiction, later mirrored in *Beyond the Words* by Elspeth Davie’s expressed fascination with “the day-to-day business of living, its mysteriousness and its absurdity”,<sup>53</sup> Robert Nye’s emphasis on a “paradigm of things as they are”<sup>54</sup> or Eva Figs’ interest in “the fragmentary nature of remembered experience”.<sup>55</sup>

In his introduction to the 1999 edition of *The Unfortunates*, Jonathan Coe describes a novel in which “[Johnson’s] two fundamental commitments – to formal innovation and to rigorous truth-telling – coalesced into a strange, powerful and spellbinding work of

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<sup>50</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: New Directions, 1999) liner notes

<sup>51</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 25

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Coe, ‘Introduction’ p. ix

<sup>53</sup> Elspeth Davie, ‘Note’ p. 88 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 87-8

<sup>54</sup> Robert Nye, ‘Note’ p. 204 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 201-4

<sup>55</sup> Eva Figs, ‘Note’ p. 114 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 113-4

literature”.<sup>56</sup> The rigours of ‘truth-telling’ evident in *Aren’t You Rather Young* and *Albert Angelo’s* ‘Disintegration’ are once again evident in *The Unfortunates*, its narrative implicitly drawn from real events as the narrator’s work as a sports reporter (which Johnson himself undertook) is disrupted by memories, stirred by his surroundings, of a close friend’s death (the character of Tony, stated by Johnson in *Aren’t You Rather Young* to be in some way commemorated by this novel). Johnson’s formal innovation is once again driven not by a desire to experiment, but a need to represent ‘truth’ in an appropriately ‘truthful’ manner:

The main technical problem with *The Unfortunates* was the randomness of the material. That is, the memories of Tony and the routine football reporting, the past and the present, interwove in a completely random manner, without chronology. This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway [...] the novel was to be as nearly as possible a re-created transcript of how my mind worked during eight hours on this particular Saturday.<sup>57</sup>

Where *Albert Angelo* demonstrably acts as a useful example for each of Johnson’s suggestions for ensuring a future for the print book, *The Unfortunates* similarly puts to work his aspirations for a novel which embodies a precision of language, an exploitation of form and medium and the explication of thought – in this case, thoughts of a deeply personal nature.

*The Unfortunates* is occupied by three major narrative strands: the narrator’s journey through an unnamed but familiar city, his reports on events from the football match, and the memories of Tony and his family which are triggered by his surroundings. From the outset of the chapter marked ‘FIRST’, it is clear that these strands are interwoven to the point of interrupting one another, lengthy spaces in the text indicating the drifting of the narrator’s mind from the sudden recognition of ‘this city’ to the melancholic vision of Tony’s ill-health:

The long office half-rounded at its ends, that iconic clerestory, brown glazed tiles, green below, the same, the decorative hammerbeams supporting nothing, above, of course! I know this city! How did I not realize when he said, Go and do City this week, that it was this city? Tony. His cheeks swallowed and collapsed around the insinuated bones, the gums shrivelled, was it, or

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Coe, ‘Introduction’ p. viii

<sup>57</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 25

shrunk, his teeth now standing free of each other in  
the unnatural half yawn of his mouth.<sup>58</sup>

The tone taken by Johnson's narrator bears certain similarities with that of Albert in *Albert Angelo* – his recognition of the city drawing on his appreciation (or seemingly affectionate mockery, in the case of the 'decorative hammerbeams supporting nothing') of its architecture, but his internal thoughts unsettled by an invasive presence, in this case being his unsettling memories. Further similarities in Johnson's precise application of language between *Albert Angelo* and *The Unfortunates* can be found later in this opening chapter, once again bearing hints towards the authorial, artificial nature of the narrative conceit presented. A particular memory of visiting the city is developed into an allegory for the act of writing and recording, which itself highlights the specific 'writing problem' at the centre of *The Unfortunates* – an assertion confirmed when viewed in the context of *Aren't You Rather Young* and once again appearing familiar from *Albert Angelo*'s 'Disintegration':

I learnt, I selected and elected to hear what I needed,  
what was of most use to me, at that time most use, from  
his discourse, yes, the word is not too pompous,  
discourse, a fine mind, a need to communicate embodied  
in it, too, how can I place his order, his disintegration?<sup>59</sup>

Once more, Johnson's linguistic style appears reminiscent of the earlier work in *Albert Angelo*. Johnson repeats for emphasis ("most use", "discourse"), re-considers for specificity ("yes, the word is not too pompous") and introduces internal rhyme ("selected and elected"), in a manner which emphasises both his narrator's faltering and questioning, and his own authorial role, deeply ingrained within the text.

The narrator of Johnson's fourth novel is openly and explicitly stated to be Johnson himself, as he describes in *Aren't You Rather Young* the specific circumstances which brought it into being:

The moment at which *The Unfortunates* (1969) occurred  
was on the main railway station at Nottingham. I had  
been sent there to report a soccer match for the  
*Observer*, a quite routine League match, nothing special  
[...] but when I came up the stairs from the platform into

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<sup>58</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, 'FIRST' p. 1

<sup>59</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 5





“Johnson’s fourth novel problematizes writing as an activity that purports to offers precise categorization, causal explanation, sequential development, and a unified flow of experience”,<sup>63</sup> highlighting that this “interrogative mood”<sup>64</sup> permeates the text as a whole. Later, the narrator dictates his notes taken throughout the match by telephone, resulting in a text bearing linguistic descriptors of punctuation, rather than orthographic symbols:

uncommon as grass on the bone hyphen bare bone  
 hyphen bare pitch on which City beat United one hyphen  
 nil at home yesterday comma and only a farcical  
 incident towards the end enlivened the tedium and  
 crudity of the match full point new par Phipps  
 comma tall and bulky as Frankenstein comma had a stagger-  
 ingly lucky match in the City goal full point Within  
 the first ten minutes he dropped an easy centre but  
 followed the ball with s prehensile hand prehensile hand 65

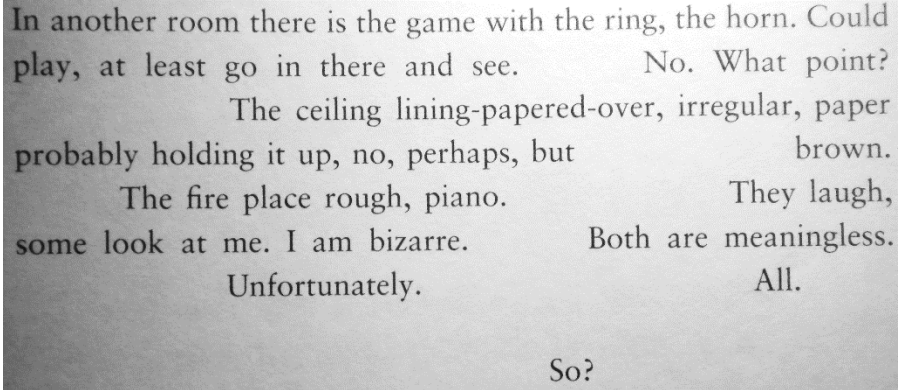
Here, Johnson’s remediation is complex, his representation of a spoken telephone dictation of a written journalistic text constituting a printed text, representing one half of a spoken dialogue, rendering in text the formal and technical apparatus of dictation, and thereby creating an unseen second text accessible only to the putative listener. Johnson creates a narrative event for which an adjustment to written form is necessary, the representation of oral communication between dictator and dictatee requiring an application of language and style which emphasises form. The speaker’s instructions in reconstructing the notes are not presented to the reader as traditional prose, nor does Johnson provide the constituent text which is constructed by such an exchange. Instead, the passage is a textual remediation of sound. In *Aren’t You Rather Young* Johnson describes the constitution of *The Unfortunates* as a representation of the manner in which his own mind worked during the events of this particular day; this extract demonstrates the primacy placed on the workings of the mind of the narrator during the composition of a text, in a manner again representative of Johnson himself as author, journalist and documentarian. Furthermore it reinforces Johnson’s engagement with form, employing the remedial potential of text to present a relationship between print and audio forms, rendered formally and stylistically on the page-space.

<sup>63</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B.S. Johnson* p. 86

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*,  p. 10

Where Johnson uses specific devices of grammar and language to emphasise the broader formal aesthetic of *The Unfortunates*, the use of the physical space of the page further exaggerates this relationship. The following extract occurs during a visit to a pub in which, as the narrator's mind wanders and shifts focus around the room, the text is increasingly widely spaced and irregular:



In another room there is the game with the ring, the horn. Could  
play, at least go in there and see. No. What point?  
The ceiling lining-papered-over, irregular, paper  
probably holding it up, no, perhaps, but brown.  
The fire place rough, piano. They laugh,  
some look at me. I am bizarre. Both are meaningless.  
Unfortunately. All.  
So?

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This extract constitutes an interior monologue of sorts, presented in fragmentary fashion as snippets of observations and brief thoughts. Johnson's claim in *Aren't You Rather Young?* that "life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily"<sup>67</sup> holds particular relevance in this case, with the text eschewing formally conventional prose in favour of a form more directly representative of the disjointed ramble taking place in his narrator's mind. Space, in this extract, represents a blankness of mind, the transitory moments between individual thoughts and recognitions which straightforward prose might fail to capture.

Where *Albert Angelo* moves between several different narrative and formal devices, *The Unfortunates* revolves around one device in particular; the separation and non-linearity of its chapters, mimetic of the random and chaotic interference of memory. Despite the focus on randomness dictated by the form and language of Johnson's novel, the beginning and ending of *The Unfortunates* are firmly dictated by the provision of the chapters marked 'FIRST' and 'LAST'. As already described, 'FIRST' establishes the tone and individual narratives explored in varying degrees of detail throughout the intervening chapters, and 'LAST' restores the randomness of those twenty-five fragments to a kind of order. Where

<sup>66</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*,  p. 3

<sup>67</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 14

'FIRST' establishes the three major strands which *The Unfortunates* explores, 'LAST' affords each a series of closing statements. Of the final three paragraphs, the first recalls the familiar descriptive passages, comparisons of form and shape drawn from the train window:

Regular sag and rise and intersection of the trackside telegraph lines against the sky, on their own, then echoing or contradicting the folds of the landscape, the sheds and shapes of the trackside towns.<sup>68</sup>

A large passage of blank space disconnects this extract from the next, a more direct musing upon language, subject matter, and writing practice which bears the repetitious language, contradiction and self-referential tone prominent in *Albert Angelo's* 'Disintegration':

The difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or generalization, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalization is to lie, to tell lies.<sup>69</sup>

The final lines of *The Unfortunates*, again separated from the previous extract by a large blank space, finalise the broader narrative project of the novel as a whole; to find a way to commemorate Tony, and to answer the question posed during the 'FIRST' chapter: "how can I place his order, his disintegration?"<sup>70</sup>:

Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us<sup>71</sup>

The closing of Johnson's novel is left unpunctuated, the missing full stop representative of a narrative which is left without conclusion or resolution. The blank space, which signifies an inability to continue along an established train of thought throughout *The Unfortunates*, is left to continue indefinitely.

Evidently *The Unfortunates* is in part a direct and critical engagement with the conventions of the novel – in making the central narrative focus not so much a direct act of

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<sup>68</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, 'LAST' p. 5

<sup>69</sup> B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, 'FIRST' p. 6

<sup>70</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 4

<sup>71</sup> B.S. Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 6

storytelling but a representation of randomness itself, Johnson identifies room for expansion in the novel form, and devises a solution. He would later describe it as a “physical tangible metaphor” – a way of imbuing the printed form of a text with a metaphorical significance which is not only a reflection upon, but functionally and metaphorically equivalent to, its written content. Narrative, linguistic elements such as the interruptions of an authorial voice and a faltering, repetitious internal monologue are coupled with an extremity of formal invention in Johnson’s use of the unbound book-in-a-box. Each of the devices discussed exist to strengthen Johnson’s representation of his central thematic concern – not to tell his story, one troubling afternoon in the city of Nottingham, but to represent and embody in text the manner in which his mind worked on that particular day. To again borrow Johnson’s phrasing, *The Unfortunates* is not an experiment in itself, but rather a presentation of solutions to an identified writing problem.

### 3.4 Summary

By paying close attention to the formal and linguistic decisions made through this selection of Johnson’s novels, it becomes clear that the arguments presented in *Aren’t You Rather Young* are not an isolated set of retrospective observations made towards the end of Johnson’s life, but the expression and culmination of a decade of innovation in the writing of novels. *Albert Angelo* marks what Johnson describes to be his first truly successful attempt to develop new forms, in which his writing might explore the solipsistic and experiential sense of ‘truth’ without leaning on the crutch – the lies – of storytelling. *The Unfortunates* reflects the creation of specific forms with the structure and physical body of the book itself, expanding upon Johnson’s prior formal and linguistic innovations in a manner which reimagines and draws close attention to the technological and narrative capabilities of the print novel. In demonstrating and encouraging a consistent awareness of the technology of books, the limitations of fictional narrative and the invention of new forms, Johnson clearly makes manifest the principles which would later be expressed and come to form The New Fiction. The New Fiction, in turn and from a position of retrospect, provides critical and historical context for the reading of Johnson’s work which emphasises the innovative and the inventive.

## Chapter 4: Ann Quin and The New Fiction

### 4.1 Introduction

In general, published literary criticism concerning Quin is scarce. What is available, however, can be loosely arranged into two groups in a similar manner to the body of Johnson criticism; some works specifically discuss Quin and her writing, whilst others use Quin as a supporting example for broader observations. Within the first group comes an article by Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, entitled simply 'Ann Quin', alongside essays by Christine Fox and Philip Stevick. Gordon's article 'Reading Ann Quin's *Berg*' focuses on the formal qualities of Quin's writing – although much of his reading is drawn verbatim from his introductions to *Beyond the Words* and the 2001 edition of *Berg*. In addition, further reissues of Quin's novels have included introductory material from Gordon and Evenson. Francis Booth's *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* devotes a sizeable chapter to discussing Quin's work in the context of other supposedly experimental writers of the period, including many New Fiction members. Ronald Hayman also places Quin alongside fellow innovative writers, including B.S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose, and outlines Quin's thematic interests. Margaret Crosland similarly situates Quin amongst comparable fellows, identifying her and Anna Kavan as "writers who experiment with the structure of fiction".<sup>1</sup> Though several attempts have been made to situate Quin contextually alongside literary peers, such comparisons are frequently made in relation to a loosely-defined experimentalism – The New Fiction offers a context based specifically on expressed methodological and ideological similarities between its members, avoiding presumption and supposition.

Hayman's *The Novel Today* demonstrates presumption in its reading of Quin, praising *Berg* "despite the borrowings from Beckett and Sarraute, who infected Ann Quin with her idiosyncratic disdain for inverted commas".<sup>2</sup> Hayman's comparison is contradicted by Marion Boyars:

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the Twentieth Century* p. 192 (New York, NY: Taplinger, 1981)

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hayman, *The Novel Today: 1967-1975* p. 9 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Press, 1976)

She was compared with such diverse writers as Graham Greene, Nathalie Sarraute and Samuel Beckett. She had, however, a very individual style and if any influences are to be found in her later work, it seems more appropriate to name people like Robert Creeley and John Cage rather than those writers named above whom she told me she had not read seriously by the time she was compared to them".<sup>3</sup>

As indicated by Fox, Quin's contemporary Robert Nye stated that *Berg* was "nearer the early work of Graham Greene than the fashionable French new-wavers its author had obviously read in her own publisher's translations and imagined she was imitating".<sup>4</sup> Calder & Boyars were indeed publishing English translations of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet at the same time as Quin, yet Boyars' words suggest that notions of 'borrowing', 'imitating' or having 'obviously read' are questionable. Quin herself describes, in 'Leaving School – XI', a rather different set of influences on her early writing:

Evenings spent in reading; half-heartedly doing homework, preferring to explore books discovered in the Public Library: Greek and Elizabethan dramatists. Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* made me aware of the possibilities in writing.) Chekhov, Lawrence, Hardy, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Evidently the associations made in established Quin criticism to literary heavyweights of the Modernist or *Nouveau Roman* traditions are predominantly negative in tone. Nye's view of Quin as having 'imagined she was imitating' is reinforced by Hayman's description of a French influence as an infection. Philip Stevick also identifies the difficulty of identifying Quin's literary influences:

What some of the early reviewers guessed was that *Berg* bore a relationship to Nathalie Sarraute and some of the modes of the new French novel. What they could not have known is that Quin had not read the French novelists whom she was seen to resemble and, in fact, had little interest in the conventions for rendering mind, either early modernist or recent French [...] she began to invent ways of

<sup>3</sup> Marion Boyars, in Giles Gordon: 'Ann Quin' p. 251

In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975) p. 251

<sup>4</sup> Robert Nye, in Christine Fox, 'Ann Quin (1936-1973): Lyrics from the Lacuna'

<http://www.pavilion.co.uk/star/AQ.html> [accessed 15/04/2013]

<sup>5</sup> Ann Quin, 'Leaving School – XI' p. 64 In: *London Magazine* Vol. 6, No. 4, 1966 pp. 63-8

representing the inner life by drawing on her own troubled mind, by introspection and a set of conventions largely of her own devising.<sup>6</sup>

The claims made on Quin's behalf by her publisher are supported here by Stevick. Again, Quin's connection to literary Modernism and the *nouveau roman* is primarily a retrospective one. Although Calder is explicitly motivated by the *Nouveau Roman* in his own intention to formalise a New Fiction group,<sup>7</sup> there is clear doubt over claims of a direct influence in written style and aesthetic in Quin's case. Gordon's 1975 anthology recognises this, and later criticism like that of Stevick in 1989 or Fox in 1992 has continued such recognition, indicating broad presumptions made in critical readings of Quin. Nevertheless, as indicated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, using The New Fiction as a lens in the manner proposed here accounts for the retrospective view; formal similarities and critical sympathies can be identified without the assumption of direct influence. Additionally, more explicit connections may be drawn between Quin and several of her New Fiction contemporaries, via published interviews and evidence from her personal correspondence

Another contextual issue emerges from Friedman and Fuchs' *Breaking the Sequence*, which establishes a series of specific challenges facing the wider recognition of three generations of innovative writing by women. In particular, Friedman and Fuchs indicate a "masculine bias contributing to the invisibility of women in the experimentalist tradition",<sup>8</sup> citing the frequency with which Woolf is frequently associated with such Modernist figureheads as Joyce or Proust, but rarely viewed as their equal. A pervading view that Woolf's fiction "illustrates innovative techniques that others pioneered"<sup>9</sup> is described as "flawed by its narrow scope",<sup>10</sup> and dealing in "critical clichés".<sup>11</sup> Friedman and Fuchs' second generation writers include Djuna Barnes, Anais Nin, Jean Rhys and H.D., and they describe a body of works which demonstrate "a radical disengagement from patriarchal modes, satirize or attack traditional structures and in some cases presuppose their

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Stevick, 'Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin' pp. 231-2

<sup>7</sup> Detailed in Chapter 3 of this thesis

<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women's Experimental Fiction in English' p. 9 In: Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Writing* pp. 3-51

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

dissolution”.<sup>12</sup> Quin is featured prominently in Friedman and Fuchs’ third generation, alongside figures like Christine Brooke-Rose and Susan Sontag, particularly comparing Quin and Sontag as creative writers who, “seeking to nullify the assumption that language imparts cultural ‘truths’, thwart the process of critical interpretation, breaking the complicity between reader and writer”.<sup>13</sup> Focusing on matters of internality, introspection and a subversion of linguistic and formal narrative structures, Friedman and Fuchs include Quin in their survey of experimental writing by women. In doing so, they associate Quin’s writing within a tradition of challenging and subverting the patriarchal dominance of the literary canon.

In her own contribution to *Breaking the Sequence*, ‘Illiterations’, Christine Brooke-Rose details the problematic nature of the contextual situation of women experimentalists. Although not mentioning Quin specifically, its broad discussion of experimental women writers examines a significant context to which Quin belongs, paying particular attention to the difficulties many innovative women experienced in being “treated on the same level of seriousness as their male counterparts”.<sup>14</sup> Brooke-Rose states that “they will be more easily forgotten between books and mysteriously absent from general situation surveys or critical books about contemporary literature, even about contemporary “experimental” novels”.<sup>15</sup> Closely related to the failures in existing criticism to recognise Woolf without the domineering context of Joyce or Proust, Brooke-Rose also warns of the dangers of attaching labels to women novelists which place them at the fringes of distinctly male-dominated literary scenes. Doing so for the sake of easy definition is further identified to be a patronising and diminishing practice which leaves women writers, in Brooke-Rose’s terms, “fluttering around a canon”.<sup>16</sup> It is for these reasons that the Brooke-Rose essay is another useful factor in considering Quin’s contextual location. If *The New Fiction* is to provide a more effective contextual basis for the reading of Quin’s work than presently-existing criticism, it must demonstrate Quin’s centrality to the group rather than allowing her to sit on its periphery. This chapter places focus on the formal, thematic and stylistic qualities of

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<sup>12</sup> Friedman and Fuchs, *op. cit.* p. 17

<sup>13</sup> Friedman and Fuchs, *op. cit.* p. 27

<sup>14</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘Illiterations’ p. 65 In: Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Writing* pp. 55-71

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



Quin's writing, using *The New Fiction* as a lens through which to view Quin's subversions of established forms and structures. Quin's inclusion in *Beyond the Words* is demonstrably based on such principles, and supported by peers such as Burns, Figes and Johnson.

Whilst there are evident discrepancies in various attempts to contextualise Quin's work, the small body of criticism presents astute observations about her written style and formal invention. Hayman offers a useful summary of each of Quin's novels, discussing recurrent themes and structures, referring to Quin's repeated use of triangular relationships, and her focus on compulsive, unspoken thoughts. Hayman also places Quin amongst a selection of authors (including Johnson, Brooke-Rose and Brigid Brophy), on the grounds that they exemplify the claim made by his chapter title: 'Realism and Experiment are not Antithetical'. Hayman's chapter offers some critical discussion of the relationship between realism and literary innovation which supports many of Johnson's and Gordon's assertions. Crucially, Hayman's selection of Quin is reliant not on assumed sympathies with other, more widely-recognised writers, but a comparable thematic interest in 'Realism and Experiment'. Stevick's selection of Quin for *Anti-Story* is similarly effective, not just for the influential authors with whom it associates Quin, but for the thematic definition offered by the chapter title under which her contribution appears: 'Against Event: The Primacy of Voice'. Stevick's anthology is structured as a series of challenges against certain mainstream assumptions, emphasising the technical qualities of the 'experimental' authors included. Rather than drawing assumptions about influence, Quin's inclusion in the 'Primacy of Voice' section discusses a specific technical quality of her work, and situates it firmly amongst Johnson's and Gordon's assertions.

Other evidence beyond published sources demonstrates the range of contacts Quin kept amongst the noted New Fiction writers – Quin, like Johnson, is not necessarily the lone dissonant voice she is sometimes identified to be. In particular, Burns refers to their close friendship, and this is further reinforced by material from the Calder & Boyars archive; both are regular attendees at one another's book launch parties, evidenced by guest lists<sup>17</sup> and memos such as the announcement of the launch party for Burns' novel *Europe After the*

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<sup>17</sup> Calder & Boyars, Guest List for party for Alan Burns and Naomi May, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1969, Box 41, Folder 64, Calder & Boyars mss., and Calder & Boyars, Guest List for party for Ann Quin and Tony Storey, 19<sup>th</sup> March 1969 Box 52, Folder 3 Box 41, Calder & Boyars mss.

*Rain*<sup>18</sup>. Quin's correspondence also reveals their ongoing friendship and professional association. In one letter, Quin notes the support of the Burns family: "I have another three weeks to convalesce, and am going to stay with the Burns as from next Saturday, and hope to be in full circulation in London by June 5<sup>th</sup>".<sup>19</sup> Another refers to Quin's speaking engagements alongside Burns:

I must admit the idea of giving a talk to the Heretic Society so early in my career as it were rather startles me – what I had more in mind when we mentioned talks and touring universities etc., was a kind of informal discussion that maybe Alan, Aiden Higgins and myself could 'inspire' or otherwise each other. Anyhow I'll try it – if only to see if I am capable of such things!<sup>20</sup>

Quin became a frequent participant in social and professional events alongside other New Fiction writers, and indeed one liable to provoke strong, divided reactions amongst her contemporaries. A final piece of evidence demonstrating her importance to The New Fiction group is the high praise afforded to her by Calder & Boyars, who state the following in an application for an Arts Council grant made shortly following the publication of *Passages* in 1969:

Ann Quin is, in our opinion, one of the most gifted and talented young English writers. In the last five years, she has developed from a promising straight novelist into a new direction of prose writing, exemplified in her new novel, *PASSAGES*, which is totally original and despite its complexity, extremely successful artistically. She exercises a complete economy and control of style, and, at the same time, takes the reader on a journey of the imagination, exploring many levels of consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

Calder & Boyars' statement indicates the ease with which Quin satisfies the criteria for Gordon's selection of writers in *Beyond the Words*. That Quin is not herself a literary critic complicates the reading of her critical alignment with her New Fiction fellows, with no primary material to compare with other contributions to *Beyond the Words* – but the

<sup>18</sup> Calder & Boyars, Memo/Statement: 'A party was given last night...', Box 41, Folder 66, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to Marion Lobbenberg [nee Boyars], 13/5/1963, Box 52, Folder 2, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to John Calder 23/1/1965, Box 52, Folder 2, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>21</sup> Calder & Boyars, Letter of Recommendation to the Arts Council, re: Ann Quin [undated, circa 1969], Box 52, Folder 3, Calder & Boyars mss.

relationships and professional associations detailed in her letters and documents restore Quin to the forefront of this New Fiction.

As indicated by Evenson and Howard, Quin's novels *Passages* and *Tripticks* were in their time "regarded as difficult and alienating by many reviewers, an attitude seen retrospectively by her publisher as having less to do with the works themselves than with the changing climate of English readership".<sup>22</sup> Writing in 2003, Evenson and Howard have the benefit of retrospect in comparing the wider climate of responsive innovation and 'new media' at the time of Quin's writing, and since her republication in the early 2000s. They correctly observe that it is not the nature of Quin's writing but the climate during which she produced it which afforded it such a lack of favourable critical review, presenting Quin similarly to Johnson as an author writing unorthodox and challenging works for which the main stream of British readership was not ready. Again like Johnson, the re-emergence of Quin's writing in the early twenty-first century affirms that it has found a more suitable audience some forty years later. Key assertions of The New Fiction agenda such as the novel's capability to transcend the storytelling function and instead address that which remained essential to the medium, or the novel's ability to adapt and evolve in response to other media, are only emphasised by the reading of her work in a new technology- and media-prevalent climate. The focus on personal thoughts and the workings of the mind referred to by Johnson is also prevalent throughout Quin's body of work, and the principles of The New Fiction continue to identify such a focus as a responsive act, and an affirmation of the technology of books and the form of the novel. It is from this point at which a close examination of Quin's writing is best begun.

Quin frequently uses a compounded representation of many separate 'channels' within a single voice, presenting a consciousness experiencing itself in multiple ways. The trend is evident through each of Quin's novels: narration and dialogue usually present multiple, internalised senses of self. Quin's writing also employs numerous formal styles within individual texts. The result of Quin's combinations, a fragmentation of the way a reader may perceive the putative reality and chronology of narrative, identity and consistency of character, has an especially prominent role – frequently it is left unclear

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard, 'Ann Quin' p. 50 In: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 23 No. 2, 2003 pp. 50-75

whether text is intended to represent dialogue or internal monologue, who is narrating, or what version of the present the narration follows. Again in accordance with the arguments posed by Johnson and Gordon, Quin's focus appears to be on finding or inventing novelistic structures which enable her to embrace multiplicity, and explore themes of frailty and insecurity. In his introduction to the 2001 edition of *Berg*, Gordon makes an observation about Quin's writing which further demonstrates the connection she shares with The New Fiction:

I quoted Quin as saying "Form interests me, and the merging of content and form. I want to get away from the traditional form... I write straight onto my typewriter, one thousand words an hour but half will in the end be cut out. When I write the first creating parts of my book I can go on for three hours without a stop. When revising I can work up to seven hours, with breaks".<sup>23</sup>

Quin's emphasis is on escaping traditional form, and she presses the importance of an amalgamation of form and content. Gordon's citation of Quin also indicates the deliberacy of her working methodology, involving lengthy periods of revision comparable to the procedural approaches described by Gordon and Burns. This characteristic, as with Johnson, may help to clarify Quin's relationship with the supposedly inaccessible world of 'experimental' fiction, with which she has so readily been associated. Quin's written style is not a result of frivolous experimentation or a defiant anti-conventionalism, instead constituting an inquisitive search for form born of its relationship with content. Quin's unusual techniques appear through The New Fiction lens to be no more than the appropriate formal and stylistic means to render a complex subject matter which is purposefully fraught with disconnection and uncertainty.

While a similar resurgence of scholarly interest to that in Johnson is yet to take place for Quin, their apparent aesthetic similarities and personal associations suggest that it may be possible. Evenson and Howard state as such: "Quin might be seen as suggesting an alternative to today's British novel, an indication of where the British novel could have gone had an interest in innovation been encouraged to flourish".<sup>24</sup> Quin, like Johnson, is in some ways innovative and extraordinary, but is also similarly burdened with the 'experimental'

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<sup>23</sup> Giles Gordon, 'Introduction' p. xii In: Ann Quin, *Berg* pp. i-xiii (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001)

<sup>24</sup> Brian Evenson, 'Introduction' p. ix In: Ann Quin, *Three* pp. vii-xiii (Normal IL, Dalkey Archive Press, 2001)

label. Using a combination of close readings of two Quin novels, and critical comparisons to The New Fiction group, the remainder of this chapter identifies what is surely a more sympathetic critical context for Quin's writing.

#### 4.2 *Passages* (1969)

The text which best demonstrates Quin's particular approach is 1969's *Passages*, her third novel, which John Hall states to be "Miss Quin's favourite book".<sup>25</sup> Quin confirms as much in a letter to John Calder, stating that "I think it is my favourite book if only because I don't yet fully understand all the levels in the work!"<sup>26</sup> In his introduction to the 2001 re-issue of *Three*, Brian Evenson offers some explanation for the lack of understanding even Quin herself experienced as reader, describing *Passages* in terms of its exploratory quality:

*Passages* offers more stylistic variation, a much more aggressive exploration of the technical possibilities of prose. In *Berg* and *Three*, third-person external narration plays a significant role; in *Passages*, however, the third person seems to be a mask adopted by objectified "I"s, and thus the authority connected with third-person narration becomes highly suspect.<sup>27</sup>

The narrative of *Passages* concerns two unnamed central characters, one male and one female, journeying through Europe, indulging more in sex and alcohol than their purported goal of tracking down a missing third party: the female's missing brother. As Evenson outlines, Quin's linguistic, stylistic and formal trickery makes more detailed synopsis difficult, its narrative events awash with carefully-crafted imprecision.

The focus of Quin's reader on any particular mode of narration, specific character or passage of time is constantly unsettled throughout *Passages*, the overall sensation being one of dreamlike recollection, or a distorted sense of reality. Quin's writing is well-matched to the school of thought which Johnson and Gordon advocate, and one can observe an engagement with degrees of narrative reality, memory, and a focus on self-identity as a product of wavering consciousness: subjects for which fragmentation and disorientation are

<sup>25</sup> John Hall, 'Landscape with Three-Cornered Dances' In: *The Guardian*: (29<sup>th</sup> April 1972) p. 8

<sup>26</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to John Calder 4/4/1969, Box 52, Folder 3, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>27</sup> Brian Evenson, 'Introduction' p. viii

more suited than linearity or consistency. *Passages* explores just the kind of internality which Johnson proclaims to be a unique property of the written word, showing the reader the inside and outside of a character simultaneously; Quin's third novel is, in this, fully in command of its own technology. Whilst Quin's narration typically comes from multiple sources at once, her primary concern is to convey sensation – 'how it felt' – in its most internal form, and her subversion of conventional narrative – the telling of 'what happened' – is simply the means to this end.

The following extract demonstrates the "stylistic variation" and "exploration of the technical possibilities of prose" which Evenson refers to:

His body a lighter brown as he leaped the waves. She didn't look at his eyes. Darkness made this easy. Easier for falling together. Making a wetness tasting of salt, lemons and almonds. I listened to the breakers, dug my heels into the sand, into the impressions he made beside me, under me. Lights from fishing boats, pernod colour, hung in space. Motors turned off. Shape of distant islands reared, knelt, rose again. Humps, shoulders of land turned over. The bite in her neck, he would remark on later, with a smile. Biting into melon. We slept beside an upturned boat. From a dream startled I thought for a moment he was someone else.<sup>28</sup>

In this extract the female, separated from her travelling companion, spends her evening with a stranger from a nightclub in an unfamiliar city. As is common throughout much of *Passages*, the narration drifts between third- and first-person; whilst "he" refers to the singular male figure, "she" and "I" both appear to share this intimate experience as one. The mode of address moves freely from the third person ("his body" and "She didn't look"), into the first person ("I listened", "beside me, under me"), and further still into an omniscient narration lacking a clear subjective centre ("lights from fishing boats", and "motors turned off" communicate an implied presence which may be near or distant, present or fleetingly past), before returning to a mixture of first- and third-person perspectives. Despite the constantly-shifting narrative, these voices all seem to emanate from the singular female character as she recalls an event taking place between a male and a compound of female selves which incorporate "I", "she" and omniscient narration. The extract demonstrates here the shifting of narrative voices which characterises much of Quin's prose, representing

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* p. 14

interior and exterior sensations alongside one another. Such a reading is supported by Fox's exploration of Quin's fusion of selves:

By defining experiential realities and fantasies which mingle, merge and separate, it is possible to indicate the space between, to open up what is gained - the extra dimension - and signal that sensual lacuna of existence where the self is felt rather than identified, present rather than revealed and therefore where the self is a possibility as well as an absence.<sup>29</sup>

The closing of the extract uses sexual union to introduce a new form of address; the first-person plural "we" draws together the overlapping male and multiple female identities, mirrored in their physical coming-together. The evident sexuality of Quin's writing is reinforced linguistically in her anthropomorphic treatment of landscape, drawing attention to "shoulders of land", and islands which "reared, knelt, rose again". The sense of convergence lasts for what may be only a brief moment – the six words of "We slept beside an upturned boat"<sup>30</sup> specify no particular length of time, felt only fleetingly by the reader before "I" returns, a jarring recognition of the separation between "I" and "he": "From a dream startled I thought he was someone else".<sup>31</sup> Reading Quin's linguistic and narrative-structural devices in this manner, examining their constant stylistic and structural divergences, places her thematically and technically in line with the broader New Fiction project. Quin bears a written style that deviates from a traditional manner of presenting character and dialogue in order to both contain and enact her fractious subject matter.

The stylistic movement between interior and exterior is not a solitary application of technique but a characteristic present throughout *Passages*. Identity and characterisation are almost always blurred or overlapping, generating a reading of internal and external narration as negotiations between content and language. In the following extract, the distinction between putative narrative events and internal fantasies is complicated by Quin's juxtaposition of imagery:

She sat in the darkness that spread. Her fingers slid over the revolver.  
Pressed against her face. She flung herself over the bed. The cliff  
edge. Waterfall. A wave carried her nearer the island. Rocks pock

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<sup>29</sup> Christine Fox, 'Ann Quin (1936-1973) Lyrics from the Lacuna'

<sup>30</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* p. 14

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

marked. Some with bullet holes. The wall he collapsed against, blood spurted out of his mouth. His body still twitched. Hers she surrendered to, the spasms he manipulated. Afterwards his hand there, wanting to sense what it was like.<sup>32</sup>

This extract concerns the couple at the centre of *Passages*, displaying the intensity and implicit violence of their relationship. Once again the mode of address shifts focus throughout, ranging from the third-person descriptions of events between “she” and “he” to the scattered, omniscient and indirect delivery of “the bed. The cliff edge. Waterfall”.<sup>33</sup> More evident in this case, however, is Quin’s readiness to distort the sense of putative reality, as narrative events rapidly switch location; the female throws herself over a bed which becomes a cliff, a waterfall or an island. Quin introduces an element of fantasy, her description of events adorned with dramatic, shifting scenery – it is unclear at first whether the firing of the revolver, and the male’s bloody collapse, take place in the novel’s putative reality or as a further imaginative embellishment on the part of its narrator, whilst the female’s sexual experience is similarly contrasted against imagery of waves and waterfalls. Simple physical acts are repeatedly reimagined, and the distinct sexuality of the scene restores a little clarity. The twitching of his body and the spasms which she “surrenders to” become not the throes of death but of orgasm, whilst the closing of the passage evokes a surprising tenderness out of the violence which precedes it, culminating in the softer imagery of “his hand there, wanting to sense what it was like”.<sup>34</sup> Quin’s language amalgamates fantasy and reality, again analogous with the relationship between an external narrative of ‘what happened’ and the multiplicity of its internal narrative; ‘how it felt’. The New Fiction facilitates a reading of Quin’s written style as precise, purposeful, and reflective of the wider New Fiction emphasis on developing forms reflective of their favoured subject matter.

Quin’s tangential and disorienting written style is firmly and consistently engaged with her subject matter. Narrators experience self-awareness, confusion, excitement and arousal – and convey as much through language and style as through narrative content. Crucially, the narrow body of criticism regarding Quin has associated this formal unorthodoxy with other media, for example the following observation from Evenson and Howard:

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<sup>32</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* p. 79

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



Narration functions like an invasive camera, with actions and events unfolding cinematically, simultaneously with the dialogue and the narration. In this sense, Quin's strongest work seems unique in its almost claustrophobic equalization of the narration: one moves from one narrative level to another abruptly and often without warning.<sup>35</sup>

Evenson and Howard evoke the image of the voyeuristic, cinematic camera, and it is appropriate to connect this to Johnson's arguments. In exhibiting a 'borrowed form', Quin allows her reader to observe her characters' actions as described by her language, and simultaneously 'takes the reader inside' of those characters. In his discussion of *Passages*, Booth explains this further:

Quin's technique is not based on any logical, causal or temporal connection, but on connections made in the narrator's mind; they are metaphoric rather than metonymic like typical narrative and thus undermine the idea of cause and effect on which narrative is based [...] though the ability to mix past and future, fact and fantasy, has often been exploited by cinema, only written narrative can, as Quin does by suppressing the use of names, merge several possible characters [...] into a simple 'she' and 'he', who may or may not be only two people, and the same people throughout the book.<sup>36</sup>

Booth's comparison between Quin's writing and the narrative capabilities of cinema can in this context further reinforce the connections between Quin and other New Fiction writing, such as Davie's and Johnson's respective foci on the influence of cinema, and the methodological borrowing from other media shown in Burns' relationship with painting and Figes' exploration of musical forms. Booth asserts that Quin's form extends upon the capabilities of film, merging voice, character and narrative in a manner uniquely possible to the written word. The unstable nature of the relationship at its centre defines *Passages*, and the disorienting form succeeds in embodying this in a way which traditional forms, particularly those 'realistic' models derided by Johnson, might indeed have failed. The result is stylistically complex, in a manner argued by The New Fiction to be a unique product of print fiction, long before Booth's and Evenson and Howard's readings.

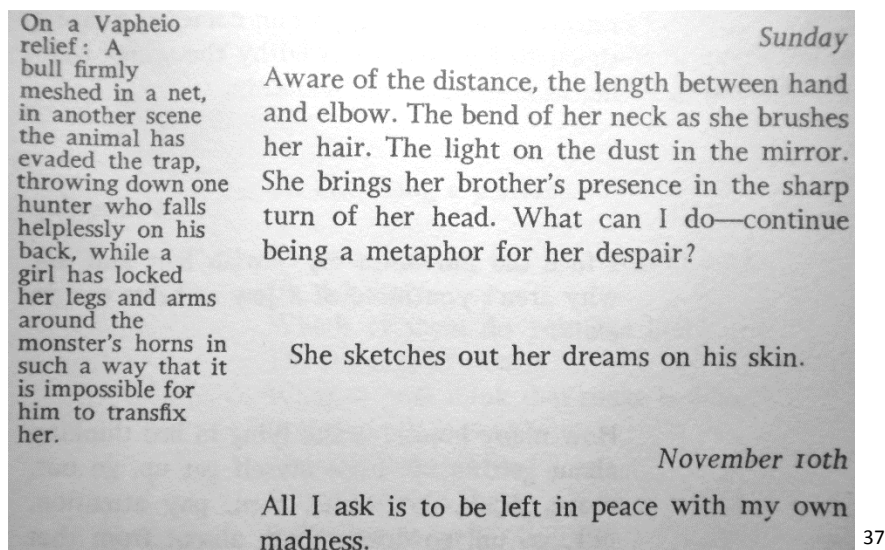
A second written form on display in *Passages* is an annotated diary attributed to the male character. These sections of text are similarly fragmented, including notes on dreams,

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<sup>35</sup> Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard, 'Ann Quin'

<sup>36</sup> Francis Booth, *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* p. 515

art and mythology, frequently analogising the male's observation of the female. Characteristically, the narration again drifts between the fantastical and the mundane, and the narrative voice moves through several positions:

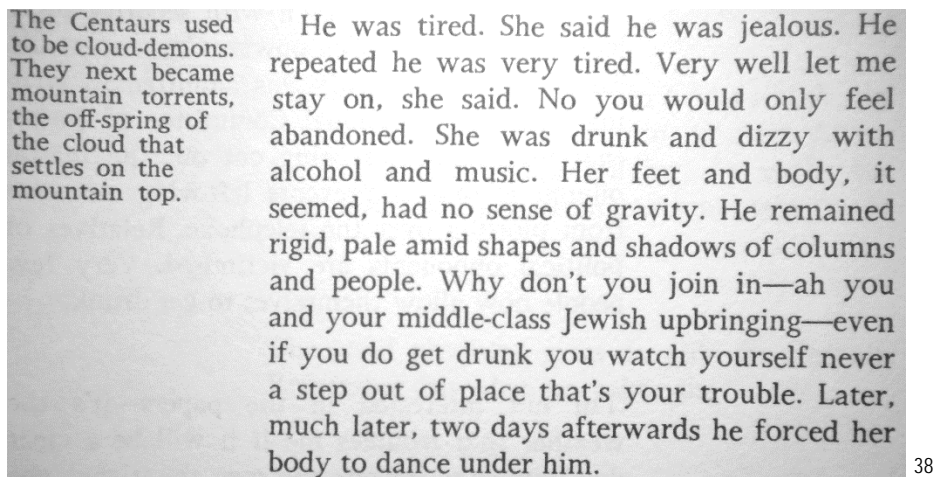


The complexity of narrative voice recurs in this extract, demonstrating Quin's ambiguities and controlled inconsistencies once more. There is an initial tenderness in the male voice, constituting a passage of straightforward physical description which implies the couple's more relaxed intimacy. Yet the "sharp turn of her head" brings the disruptive presence of the third between them, and the statement that "she sketches out her dreams on his skin" appears to refer to the female protagonist's fixation on her brother's ("his") possible death. Additionally, the main body of text is coupled with a marginal annotation regarding a violent scene in which a male and female protagonist wrestle with a bull – the male is defeated and left helpless by the beast, whilst the female uses her cunning to evade and entrap it. The imagery in the primary column of the two protagonists affected by a disruptive third presence, differing greatly in their ability to cope, is in this case reinforced by the second column, analogising for the contrast between tenderness and unwelcome distraction with the intense physicality of the bullfight.

Quin's contrast between physical intimacy, jealousy and violence continues to be reinforced by the marginal notes on mythology, ensuring that the diary form attributed to the male narrator bears a similar degree of disorientation to complex, lyrical prose attributed to the female. Multiple narrative voices once again occupy individual narrative

<sup>37</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* p. 107

passages, and different modes of address are deployed in quick succession as the relationship between the novel's central pairing grows increasingly tense:



The Centaurs used to be cloud-demons. They next became mountain torrents, the off-spring of the cloud that settles on the mountain top.

He was tired. She said he was jealous. He repeated he was very tired. Very well let me stay on, she said. No you would only feel abandoned. She was drunk and dizzy with alcohol and music. Her feet and body, it seemed, had no sense of gravity. He remained rigid, pale amid shapes and shadows of columns and people. Why don't you join in—ah you and your middle-class Jewish upbringing—even if you do get drunk you watch yourself never a step out of place that's your trouble. Later, much later, two days afterwards he forced her body to dance under him.

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Beginning from a position of free indirect discourse, this extract quickly moves through the indirect speech of “She said he was jealous” into two separate statements of free direct speech: “very well let me stay on, she said” and “no you would only feel abandoned” (the latter in the freest form). Quin ostensibly presents dialogue between two characters, but they might equally be read as a single speaker, interrupting and contradicting their own train of thought. The lack of quotation marks or reporting clauses ensures that the attribution of this narration to a particular speaker is solely down to reader interpretation. A brief section of third person narrative intervenes before an outburst of free direct speech, and yet even though the specificity of its target – “you and your middle-class Jewish upbringing” – implies a verbal attack from the female towards the male, this section could equally represent the male's own insecurity; Quin's common theme of a voice in the head, preventing him from “joining in”. The conclusion of this extract bears one of Quin's more striking juxtapositions, emerging from the frustration and disorientation evident in this extract. This encounter treads a narrow line between reconciliation and sexual violence, with “he forced her body...” contrasted against the more subtle and congenial imagery of “...to dance under him”. The relationships at work within *Passages* are fractured, and their formal representation reflects and embodies this fracturing.

Quin's linguistic and stylistic invention introduces complexity into her characterisation, invoking voices and perspectives which seem to confound a singular,

<sup>38</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* p. 89

defined view of narrative voice. The epistolary form modified by Quin reinforces some of the claims made about her lyrical prose; rather than seeking to describe events and characterisation in accordance with an established convention, the representational devices of Quin's writing are drawn from the internal frailties and insecurities which underpin this narrative. What emerges is an evocation of memory and sensation – the drawing together of voices from a fractious relationship, brought together by physical intimacy but driven apart by alcohol, violence and the disruptive non-presence of the third. The New Fiction allows for the recognition of the carefully-crafted nature of Quin's formal and stylistic unorthodoxy, ensuring that this reading avoids the accusations of gimmicky experimentalism and identifies Quin to be a deliberate and purposeful innovator.

#### 4.3 *Three* (1966)

Hayman's summary in *The Novel Today* touches upon a significant structural element of Quin's writing when he states that "Ann Quin's obsessive theme was triangular relationships involving a couple and an outsider".<sup>39</sup> *Passages* retains this theme throughout, revolving around the pair at its centre and evoking a third, be it in their various sexual misadventures with other partners or the distinct non-presence of the female's brother. As such, the third figure shifts in and out of focus, and the partnership in *Passages* feels unbalanced without a definitive third presence. The endless searching which the characters undertake seems at least in part to relate to this imbalance – not only are they searching for the displaced or deceased brother, but also for resolution on their own troubled affair. The result is full of sensation, but ultimately that third entity never comes into focus; the triangle is never completed, and as such there is no final reconciliation between the two. In a rare piece of candour, Quin describes openly in the Hall interview the root of this pattern of three – equal parts sexual fantasy and narrative device:

Sometimes when you explore a fantasy it stops short of the imagined thing. Most do. But this actual experience was so far beyond the fantasy that I found it very, well, you could say enlarging.<sup>40</sup>

Once more there are convergences with Johnson's autobiographical basis for his writing; Quin utilises her writing to 'extend' upon certain real-world experiences, this experience in

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Hayman, *The Novel Today 1967-1975* p. 9

<sup>40</sup> Ann Quin, in John Hall, 'Landscape with Three-Cornered Dances' para 14-5 of 18

particular forming a strand of narrative enquiry which spans almost her entire body of work.

The pattern of three can be viewed in more detail by turning to Quin's second published novel, itself aptly titled *Three*. The triangular relationship presented in *Three* is also missing its third member; this novel presents a relationship of a middle-aged married couple, Ruth and Leonard, and the discomfort left in their lives by the death of their lodger, referred to only as 'S'. Unlike *Passages*, the absent third is directly represented within the text, whilst Leonard and Ruth are given the kind of kaleidoscopic narrative voices and modes of address developed further in *Passages*. *Three* contains sections of text attributed to S including diary entries, lists, and transcripts of audio recordings. Evenson's introduction to the 2001 edition of *Three* confirms its importance amongst Quin's works; *Passages* may have been her favourite, but *Three* appears to have had the most favourable critical reception. Evenson refers to a review from *The Scotsman*, which declares Quin "The most naturally and delicately gifted novelist of her generation [...] If you don't read [*Three*] then you're not interested in the present and possible future of the English novel".<sup>41</sup>

It becomes clear in the reading of *Three* that, although Ruth and Leonard are the only two characters present, assigning dialogue accurately to either can prove problematic. The following extract demonstrates the bickering couple's bickering over mundane issues and, more significantly, the style which Quin adopts to reinforce the frustration they hold:

She slipped the ice in, tilted the glass, and leaned over the sofa, watched a bird tap a snail along the path, against the terrace steps. There all gone now no trace left. Where's Bobo is he outside Leon? How should I know? Go and call him darling. You know he won't come if I call. Yes he will if you whistle go on be a dear will you? She fell back against the cushion, eyes closed. Won't you?<sup>42</sup>

Evident once again is Quin's abandonment of quotation marks and reporting clauses, which complicates the reading of an otherwise straightforward piece of dialogue. The extract begins with Ruth finishing her drink and asking Leon a question. This is made clear by the naming of Leon as the addressee. The text then alternates between the two as they respond – somewhat irritably – to one another. There is an evident tension between the

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<sup>41</sup> Evenson, 'Introduction' in Quin 2001 p. ix

<sup>42</sup> Ann Quin, *Three* p. 5 (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001)

two which culminates in resignation from Ruth as she falls back into the sofa. However, this reading may be too simple. The line “You know he won’t come if I call” could easily be read – lacking quotation marks or reporting clauses – as either Leon’s reply or a continuation from Ruth’s question; it is uncertain whether it is Ruth or Leonard to whom the cat Bobo will refuse to come. The next line, beginning “Yes he will...” in the second circumstance becomes not a reiteration of Ruth’s request but a reassuring response from Leonard, and the final statement of “Won’t you?” becomes not a despondent reaction to Leonard’s non-compliance, but a third and final request with a notably pleading tone. Evenson describes Quin’s unusual dialogic style in his introduction to the 2001 edition of *Three*:

The resulting effect is to slow down the reading process, demand that one constantly step back and reread, re-envision what one has begun to think. This inflects a certain tentativeness on the narrative process, further destabilizing the reading experience.<sup>43</sup>

Evenson’s description of destabilisation is significant to an understanding of Quin’s choice of form. Although fairly slight at this early stage of the novel, the unsettled attribution of dialogue forces the reader to question and reinterpret their own understanding of the arguments between Leonard and Ruth – and in doing so experience their failures to communicate. Quin’s exploration of miscommunication is again conducted through her formal and stylistic technique, supplementing the oppressive domesticity of Leonard and Ruth’s narrative by enacting its underlying complexities.

The atmosphere between the couple at the centre of *Three* comes not from a particular disturbance, but from stagnation. Their life is one of dull domesticity, with emotional peaks coming in the form of bouts of depression and anger:

She brought her legs closer together. He watched her pull the blankets, sheet up, her face buried in the pillow. Ruthey.... Yes? Oh doesn’t matter. He switched the light out, slowly undressed, pulled back the curtains, groped his way between furniture towards his bed. Lovely full moon. What was that? I said there’s a full moon how’s the head? Just tired so exhausted after everything oh darling can you draw the curtains a bit the moon’s so bright. At the window he stared out.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Brian Evenson, ‘Introduction’ p. xii

<sup>44</sup> Ann Quin, *Three* p. 16

This passage – although more easily attributed in terms of the dialogic exchange between Leonard and Ruth – further demonstrates the failures in communication which affect their relationship. Leonard’s apparent frustration that Ruth rejects his advances goes essentially unspoken, the ellipsis indicating that he changes his mind about raising the issue, instead saying “Oh, doesn’t matter”. Further into the extract, the reader is compelled to experience some of the more subtle elements of this miscommunication; when Leonard says “Lovely full moon” it is perfectly legible for the reader, and yet Ruth appears to mishear, responding “what was that?” Considering Quin’s use of the ellipsis to indicate Leonard’s previous hesitancy, there is an element of doubt introduced over whether Ruth mishears, or in fact chooses not to pay attention, to words which Leonard appears to speak clearly. In this case, Quin’s controlled application of form and narrative voice once again introduces interpretive possibilities to the reader’s understanding of the couple’s increasing disquiet.

Ultimately Leonard’s frustrations turn to aggression, and in turn Quin’s use of form comes to represent a complete breakdown of communication between the couple. Leonard assaults Ruth, in a passage of unusually linear narrative, bearing a cold, sequentially descriptive style that is extremely rare in Quin’s writing and leaves no room for her more common narrative ambiguity:

She sprang back and curled up, shuddering against the wall. He searched for a cigarette, watched the red dot near, away from him, smoulder. Listen Ruth if you want... I don’t want anything – just go – go on please – please leave me alone – alone. He tried to see her against the wall, clinging there. He sat up. Her hand came out, fists against him, in space, areas of darkness around him. He caught hold of her arms, and pulled her down under him.<sup>45</sup>

The fragmentary, scattered representation of the central relationship established throughout *Three* is almost entirely missing from this particular scene, adopting instead a third-person narration which describes the action taking place. The unsettling nature of this particular extract is established not just through its depiction of sexual violence, but also the comparatively simple manner in which it is presented.

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<sup>45</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 128

Throughout *Three*, the episodes describing the disintegration of Ruth and Leonard's relationship are separated by the journals and recordings made by S during her time living with them. Ruth observes Leonard going through S's possessions: "He pulled some dresses out, held them up. Charity I suppose. There's her tape recorder too. Journals – I think she kept a journal. Heavens I'd forgotten about that".<sup>46</sup> Quin's form presents a textual remediation of S's audio recordings as lists and snippets of disjointed observations:

Midnight. Insomnia. Avoiding early morning  
light. Shifts in an area. Outside  
frenetic attempts. At reconciliation  
here. The gardens  
where men came. Lopped off branches. Those left. Stark.  
Squat  
no longer cut into clouds. Houses used to tunnel through.  
Venetian blinds. Sky split by grass.

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Sections of text such as "Venetian blinds. Sky split by grass" seem to suggest a scene-by-scene transcription of visual material, indicating S's tendency to document snapshot images as short, descriptive utterances. Quin's choice of form, however, adds a further dimension to the reading of S; the sequential reading of printed text invites the formation of connections between S's fragments. The section reading "Midnight. Insomnia. Avoiding early morning light" suggests a clear narrative chronology from midnight until early morning, with Quin's use of full-stops and wide typographic spacing signifying this extract to constitute three individually-recorded statements made during this period of time. The act of reading S's words as text mirrors Ruth and Leonard's experience of listening back through the tape-recordings, becoming necessarily retrospective and transformative, and distanced from S's apparent snapshot approach to compiling the recordings. In this, Quin's writing appears reminiscent of the Samuel Beckett play *Krapp's Last Tape*, and despite the aforementioned claims by Boyars that Quin had not seriously read Beckett by the time of her later published novels, Quin acknowledges some degree of influence in letters between she and Calder in 1969. Quin refers to Beckett when addressing poor initial reviews of *Passages*, describing herself as "a bit like Beckett when asked what the meaning was in one of his books and he replied something like 'if I knew the meaning I wouldn't have written

<sup>46</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 16

<sup>47</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 24



it'!!"<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as late as 1973 Quin continues to indicate her readership of Beckett, counting his books amongst the precious few survivors of an unfortunate incident with an unwell cat in a letter to Boyars.<sup>49</sup> Previous readings of Quin have taken such similarities to indicate a direct comparison between she and Beckett, yet such a connection also further strengthens her position amongst her New Fiction contemporaries. Johnson, for one, is entirely open about the influence of Beckett on not just the formal and technical aspects of writing, but his broader literary ideology. Primarily, the character of S exemplifies Quin's clear and purposeful development of form, constituting a complex textual remediation contrasting the act of recording against the act of reading. This coupled with an apparent Beckettian influence only serves to position her writing even more firmly alongside the interrogations of literary form with other narrative media made by The New Fiction group.

Insight on S's background can be gleaned from the sections of text representing her recordings, and Quin's already-complex negotiations between different media are further complicated by the introduction of memory as a major source for S's narrative. One particular example uses the fragmentary stop-start style which characterises these sections to relate something of S's troubled convent upbringing:

Kneeling  
on hot tennis courts. Tarmac clinging. Hymns chanted.  
Hell Mary full of grapes. Our Father who farts in Heaven.  
Authority of those allowed to wear veils. Black in Retreat. Smuts  
on smug foreheads. In honour of Ash Wednesday. The one who  
had epileptic fits. Wanted to be Bernadette in end of term play.  
Prayers delivered for a moment's release. From Irregular Verbs.  
The Angelus. The lavatory. Refuge for comics. Pornography.<sup>50</sup>

Extracts such as this demonstrate Quin's continued exploration of representing formally the fragmentary and chaotic nature of memory. This recalls Johnson's description of life as "chaotic, fluid, random"<sup>51</sup> or Figes' attempts to "impose a sort of order on chaos".<sup>52</sup> The language of this extract stumbles over image after image as they enter S's mind, overlapping memories not unlike Johnson's recollections of travelling through the city in *The Unfortunates*. Indeed, where Johnson openly cites Joyce as a major influence on his

<sup>48</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to John Calder 4/4/1969, Box 52, Folder 3, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>49</sup> Ann Quin, Letter to Marion Boyars 10/2/1973, Box 52, Folder 4, Calder & Boyars mss.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 36

<sup>51</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 14

<sup>52</sup> Eva Figes, in Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* p. 114

own explorations of form and literary technique, Quin's writing bears Joycean irreverence and punning in her subversion of the Lord's Prayer.

A further comparison may be made to the autobiographical nature of Johnson's writing: Johnson asserts that the events of *The Unfortunates* are based on a specific personal experience, whilst this extract from *Three* closely mirrors Quin's memories in 'Leaving School':

Non-Catholics attended chapel every Friday. Joined in the morning prayers. Hymns. Marched in the Corpus Christi processions, dressed in white, knelt on hot tennis courts, but not allowed to throw petals. Listened to scripture lessons. Struggled up from desk at noon and mumbled the Angelus.<sup>53</sup>

Commissioned as the eleventh in a series of short prose works detailing contemporary writers' journeys from leaving school to professional authorship, Quin's piece bears many images repeated in the representation of S, but in an autobiographical context. References to Quin's convent school upbringing centre around the hot tennis courts, the chanting of hymns and the muttering of the Angelus, as well as other repeated imagery such as the black, white and grey of the school itself, and the navy blue uniforms of its pupils. Not only does Quin's form compare to Johnson's stylistic and typographic evocation of memory, but her narrative similarly draws from personal experiences.

Rather than providing a typical documentary narrative, S's journals intensify the strange disconnect between her and the reality which Ruth and Leonard occupy:

*Tuesday*

Oblivion with all the doors open. Walk into their room. Lie on her bed. His. Confront the mirror. R's latest lipstick, dress, hats at all angles. Her wardrobe on one side full of toys. Huge teddy bear with an eye missing. Pity she doesn't keep a diary. Letters immediately destroyed – an animal covering its tracks. Pursued by a compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold. So often scorned before, but soon understood, almost succumbed to: an ambiguous luxury, with them an inherent instinct.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Quin, 'Leaving School – XI' p. 63

<sup>54</sup> Ann Quin, *Three* p. 61

Similar ambiguities exist in S's writing to the narrative complications in Ruth and Leonard's dialogue. When describing her own activity S takes an almost instructional tone, making short observations about her surroundings. Evenson provides one suggestion for why S describes her own activities in such a disconnected, directorial manner, stating that "Her diaries are less about preserving facts than about asserting, even performing, a self, and providing a world to go with it".<sup>55</sup> As Evenson implies, S is a performer, and the world which she imagines around herself is as stage in which she envisions others – Ruth and Leonard – performing their own roles, too. A further relationship between S's recordings and other narrative media is established through the designing and performing of mime plays – and specific references to theatrical performance provide a key to reading both the character of S, and the manner in which she observes Leonard and Ruth. Once again Quin employs familiar New Fiction devices, mirroring Johnson's and Figs' employment of elements borrowed from dramatic script, modified to suit her own narrative goals. The following extract describes one of such plays, exhibiting Quin's modification of stage direction:

A plan devised. For their amusement. With masks.  
 Situation  
 insoluble.  
 Three points *A B* and *C* on a rigid body in a straight line. When  
 the points *A* and *C* being given *B* is chosen such that the sum  
 of distances  
*AB* and *BC* is as short as possible.  
 Suggestion *A* walks past *B* and *C*. *A* might turn. Stop. Shrug.

56

One can read the roles of *A*, *B* and *C* as references to Ruth, Leonard and S herself. No indication is given, however, as to which role corresponds to which character. At this stage, S's theatrical observations of the relationships between herself, Ruth and Leonard remain ambiguous, three ghostly figures share a space and interact, but their connections to one another have "variations endless". Later sections of *Three* seem to resolve some of these ambiguities, specifically referencing Ruth and Leonard, the roles of *A B* and *C* now clearly assigned as R, L, and implicitly, S:

<sup>55</sup> Brian Evenson, in Ann Quin, *Three* p. x

<sup>56</sup> Ann Quin, *Three* p. 21

*Saturday*

At my suggestion L made a platform, with steps leading from either side, in the empty swimming pool. We both write little scenarios, which R half-heartedly joins in. We improvise as we go along. My favourite one with the masks is just the three of us, two reject one, or one rejects two, or all three reject each other, or equally accept.<sup>57</sup>

The tensions which continue to exist between Leonard and Ruth, long after the recordings are made, implying S's exploration of acceptance and rejection to be analogous to their relationship.

By providing a theatrical space in which Ruth and Leonard may take on these roles 'R' and 'L', S seems to be interrogating their faltering communication. It is made clear that she has developed an obsession with learning about their relationship, going so far as to spy on them and read their diaries:

Today I came across L's diary. Days of headaches, appointments, library, dinner and lunch engagements. Nothing very much apart from some little black crosses, which seem to be some kind of code. I spilt some coffee over the desk, some trickled onto a page. I wiped it carefully but there was still a slight mark. Immediately visited with fears, crazy thumping ones caught up with those choking ones when a child stealing apples, flowers, or the silver threepenny bits out of the box Mother kept, but there were so many she'd hardly notice a few missing?<sup>58</sup>

S observes a stifling mundanity – in this extract, every day of Leonard's diary appears the same, and there are frequent references throughout S's narrative to the claustrophobic nature of his and Ruth's existence. S's motivation seems by this stage relatively clear – earlier references to a "compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold"<sup>59</sup> indicate that S's desire is to break this cycle, and introduce something fantastical into their experiential dullness:

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 66

<sup>58</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 65

<sup>59</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 61

Visitors. Change of linen. Every other day.  
 Existence bound by habit. Hope. Theirs. Nothing to contend  
 with.  
 The worst effort not to contradict their next movement  
 At first.

60

Ultimately, S grows frustrated that her efforts to destabilise and incite some activity into Ruth and Leonard's lives are failing. A further journal entry demonstrates the desperation S feels for them:

*Monday*  
 A recognisable nausea provokes the desire to become something  
 in their lives, anything. Everything. But whose move is the  
 next?

61

Not unlike *Passages*, the resolution which she seems to seek for Ruth and Leonard's relationship appears to be impossible. S's final words – and the lines which close *Three* – appear to be an acceptance that despite her best efforts, the slow downward spiral of Leonard and Ruth will not even be stopped by the most drastic of measures:

Today the first signs of a sharpness in the air. The mist rises up  
 from the ground lying in thin frost. The boat is ready, as planned.  
 And all that's necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change.

62

Like *Passages*, *Three* ends on a distinct lack of closure. Despite the degree of complexity introduced to the relationships between individual characters, the overall narrative development of *Three* is virtually static, S ultimately committing suicide rather than provoking the upheaval in Ruth and Leonard's lives which she desired. Indeed, a reading based on the arguments of *The New Fiction* allows the innovative nature of Quin's writing here to be properly recognised, necessarily contrasting a narrative in which very little action takes place against a dense, disorienting and fractious written style. Quin's invention is again clearly purposeful – her formal and stylistic techniques are themselves an enactment of the complexities and multiplicities which exist within her narrative.

#### 4.4 Summary

<sup>60</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 21

<sup>61</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 60

<sup>62</sup> Ann Quin, *op. cit.* p. 143

Drawing comparisons between Quin and Johnson, The New Fiction premise of utilising form and narrative voice to allow the reader to simultaneously read the inside and outside of a character seems to be exhibited in both authors' work. Johnson's use of the 'physical metaphor' allows the form of *The Unfortunates* to not only represent but enact crucial characteristics of its thematic focus. Quin achieves something similar through her combinations of narrative, form and style throughout both *Three* and *Passages*. More generally, it is a consistent feature of positive critical responses to Johnson that his capability for innovative writing never overshadows his drive to craft works that are highly readable, entertaining and at all times explicitly novelistic. Whilst Quin faced similar criticisms to Johnson amongst the wider mainstream for a particularly 'difficult' brand of writing, Quin also creates novels with an intensely personal feeling, evocative and entertaining as much as they are formally and stylistically complex.

## Chapter 5: A New Fiction in the Twenty First Century

### 5.1 Introduction

As a set of critical ideologies about the modern British novel of the '60s and '70s, The New Fiction places writers such as B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin in context. In doing so, writers like Johnson and Quin are freed from accusations of flippant gimmickry, and from a pervading view of their work as isolated and anomalous, placing them at the forefront of a community of like-minded novelists building on the literary innovations of modernism. The relatively narrow time-period represented by The New Fiction would, however, potentially confine a combined reading of their creative and critical endeavours to a distinctly historical perspective. As indicated by Eva Figes (and discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis), the deaths of Johnson and Quin marked the end of the group before it could progress as a formalised literary movement akin to their *Nouveau Roman* predecessors. Crucially, however, both novelists representing The New Fiction in this thesis – Johnson and Quin – have been republished since the turn of the millennium, providing renewed opportunity to read their works, and to re-evaluate The New Fiction context to which they belong.

As Jonathan Coe argues in his introduction to the 1999 reissue of Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, perhaps "B.S. Johnson's moment has come at last".<sup>1</sup> Although Coe refers specifically to the potential audience for Johnson's novels, this thesis expands this goal. Johnson's New Fiction fellows, and the critical arguments they collectively offer, may be afforded similar recognition. Denied a sympathetic audience during their lifetimes, the substantially renewed interest in their work demands the reassessment of their literary and critical value. A similar argument is made by Kaye Mitchell, specifying the new critical context which supplies such opportunity for reassessment:

If the format of Johnson's novel [*The Unfortunates*] was perceived at the time of publication as radical or even disconcerting (at least to publishers concerned with overheads), then it would perhaps appear much less so to the twenty-first century reader familiar with internet-based hypertexts [...] it is comprised of 'blocks of text' (the individual sections' which can be arranged according

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'Introduction' p. xiv In: B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* pp. v-xv (New York, NY: New Directions, 1999)

to the reader's present and immediate desire, thereby offering that reader 'different pathways' through the novel, so it has a structural affinity with hypertext narratives, which it could be said to prefigure. Even the terminology here ('users') seems apt as it emphasises the agency of the reader, and the different possible 'uses' of the text.<sup>2</sup>

To that end, this chapter has two central aims. Firstly, it introduces the ways in which new editions of Johnson's and Quin's writing allow them to be read from a twenty-first century perspective. Secondly, it argues that by situating them amongst the critical arguments and creative methodologies of newer innovative writing, The New Fiction's critical arguments are sustained into the present day.

## 5.2 New Publications

As referenced in the first half of this thesis, Johnson's and Quin's respective novelistic careers are comparatively short. Johnson's death in 1973 at the age of 40 came just a decade after the publication of *Travelling People*. Quin also died in 1973, aged 37, just nine years after the publication of *Berg*. As has been demonstrated in this thesis, there are notable parallels between the two novelists' literary aesthetics and writing methodologies. However, Johnson and Quin seem to all but disappear from critical and commercial attention shortly after 1973; Gordon's anthology-cum-manifesto is the final piece of serious critical interest in their work from this time, and his attempt to form a fully-fledged literary movement around their respective legacies was a failure. Indeed, despite brief sparks of vigorous investigation into Johnson's writing occurring in 1985 – and briefer still into Quin's – both authors remained largely condemned to obscurity until the final years of the twentieth century. This section details the additional, chronological parallels between Johnson and Quin which extend far beyond their lifetimes, most notably in terms of the post-millennial republication of their bodies of work.

Chapter 3 of this thesis noted a lack of sustained critical engagement with Johnson's work prior to the turn of the millennium. The emergence of dedicated critical texts in the

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<sup>2</sup> Kaye Mitchell, 'The Unfortunates: Hypertext, Linearity, and the Act of Reading' pp. 56-7  
In: Philip Tew and Glyn White (eds.), *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* pp. 51-64  
(Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)



twenty-first century<sup>3</sup> constitutes a significant and unprecedented growth of critical attention. Such growth evidently continues, with Johnson at the forefront of new critical works such as Francis Booth's *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* (2012), and Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle's edited volume of essays, *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde* (2014).<sup>4</sup> This evident renewal of critical attention is matched by commercial interest in his works, with the republication of five of Johnson's novels. In 1999, Johnson returned to the shelves of mainstream bookshops with New Directions' reissue of *The Unfortunates*, and in 2001 Picador reissued *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. Picador's second Johnson reissue was more substantial, with *Omnibus* (2004) collecting together *Albert Angelo* (1964), *Trawl* (1966), and *House Mother Normal* (1971) in a single volume, and all three of the *Omnibus* novels, alongside *Christie Malry*, were republished once more in 2013. Marking the eightieth year since Johnson's birth, 2013 also saw the formation of the B.S. Johnson Society, the founding of *BSJ: The B.S. Johnson Journal*, the release of *The Films of B.S. Johnson* by the British Film Institute, and the publication of *Well Done God!: Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, an edited collection incorporating many of Johnson's dramatic and journalistic works alongside a complete reproduction of *Aren't you Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*. *Well Done God* is of particular significance, not only for its status as a new edited collection of previously unavailable or obscure Johnson texts, but as a twenty first century publication which incorporates the cornerstone of Johnson's critical arguments about literary form, experimentation, technology, and the modern novel. By virtue of this sizable body of material, newly available through mainstream publishers and distributors, Johnson may be repositioned, both as author and critic, for comparison with twenty first century literature and criticism amongst which his works now appear.

Critical interest in Quin's writing is similarly dispersed throughout this earlier period and, as indicated in chapter four of this thesis, is demonstrably limited in its critical assertions and contextual scope. The short chapters appearing in Ronald Hayman's *The Novel Today* (1976) and Ellen Friedman's and Miriam Fuchs' *Breaking the Sequence* (1992)

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<sup>3</sup> See the aforementioned *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (2001) and *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* (2007), as well as Jonathan Coe's biography of Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Further discussion of the body of critical works discussing B.S. Johnson since 2000 is included in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

are unmatched until Quin is discussed at length in the Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard essay 'Ann Quin' (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 2003), and in a dedicated chapter in Francis Booth's *Amongst Those Left*. Quin's inclusion in anthologies including Nell Dunn's *Talking to Women* (1965), Philip Stevick's *Anti-Story* (1971), and Gordon's *Beyond the Words* (1975) constitutes significant recognition of her status as a vibrant literary innovator, but it is recognition as yet unrepeated since 1975. Quin has also, like Johnson, been the subject of a more recently-published biography, Robert Buckeye's *Re: Quin* (2013), which presents a notably personal account of Quin's life and works. Whilst Quin's writing is clearly yet to experience the same resurgence of critical interest as Johnson's, she too has a growing literary presence. 2001 saw the republication of two novels, *Berg* (1964) and *Three* (1966), featuring introductory material from Gordon and Evenson respectively, through Dalkey Archive Press' 'British Literature' series. *Tripticks* (1972) would follow through the same imprint in 2002, and the 2003 publication of *Passages* (1969) saw the completion of a project to bring all four of Quin's novels back into print in the twenty-first century. Though having a considerably smaller profile than Johnson, Quin can be similarly identified as an innovative author republished in the twenty first century, with a wider readership than was ever achieved during her lifetime.

In the introduction to the 2013 reissue of Johnson's *House Mother Normal*, Andrew Motion describes not a forgotten writer, but one with "enduring appeal".<sup>5</sup> In making this claim, Motion demonstrates the continued relevance of Johnson's arguments, reinforcing for the twenty first century reader the view established in *Aren't You Rather Young*: "His fictions should contain 'no lies', and he evolved all kinds of devices (formal and otherwise) to demonstrate his intent".<sup>6</sup> Jon McGregor's introduction to *Trawl* echoes this assertion, arguing that "vivid truthfulness is what Johnson was aiming for, and it's an achievement to be celebrated".<sup>7</sup> In a similar introduction, to the reissued *Albert Angelo*, Toby Litt recognises the significance of republishing Johnson's writing for a new audience:

B.S. Johnson did not know that his shocking outburst of 'OH FUCK ALL THIS LYING!' would not become a rallying cry for all fiction. B.S. Johnson did not know that he was not fundamentally changing

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Introduction' p. ix In: B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* pp. v-ix (London: Picador, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Jon McGregor, 'Introduction' p. ix In: B.S. Johnson, *Trawl* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. v-ix

English writing. B.S. Johnson did not know that he was not fundamentally changing English society. Yet which contemporary writer would think it worth writing an experimental novel in the hope of drawing attention to the government's education policy? [...] *This time*, the experiment might succeed. The slimy stuff might become beautifully and permanently alive. The idealism might be fulfilled. The radicalism might generally convert. Things might change for the good, because of something written.<sup>8</sup>

Litt argues that the twenty first century may offer an ideological location for Johnson's writing which his own time did not. Though continuing to use the terminology of experimentalism (which itself erects certain barriers, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis), Litt ultimately attributes Johnson's re-emergence with renewed commercial appeal. The three 2013 introductions appear in stark contrast to Coe's early assertions from his introduction to the 1999 edition of *The Unfortunates*, in which he describes Johnson as "already a forgotten writer",<sup>9</sup> for whom "the tides of literary fashion have ebbed and flowed often enough to wipe his name from collective memory".<sup>10</sup> Instead, Motion, Litt, and McGregor's commentaries serve to reinforce the more optimistic claim made by Coe later in the same introduction: "it's time to reclaim B.S. Johnson for the mainstream".<sup>11</sup>

Evenson's introduction to the 2001 reissue of *Three* suggests that a similar fate may yet be possible for Quin:

Remarkably contemporary in its stylistic sophistication, *Three* is a book we might only now begin to appreciate in all its strength, all its complexity. It reveals Quin to have a voice that remains still vibrant, still relevant to our current understanding of the possibilities of fiction. Her experiments with narrative possess a freshness and eccentricity which make them startling and valuable. It is thus fitting that *Three*, more than three decades after its first appearance, should be given a new life, made available to a new generation of readers and writers.<sup>12</sup>

Evenson's assertions closely mirror the observations made of Johnson's ongoing vitality; Quin's writing remains complex, surprising, and challenging for a twenty first century

<sup>8</sup> Toby Litt, 'Introduction' pp. vii-viii In: B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. v-ix

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'Introduction' p. v

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'Introduction' p. vi

<sup>12</sup> Brian Evenson, 'Introduction' p. xiii In: Ann Quin, *Three* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001) pp. vii-xiii

readership. Likewise Buckeye's commentary, more than a decade later, continues to argue that "her writing may yet survive its defeat, but its defeat surely determines literature in our times".<sup>13</sup> The durability and contemporaneity attributed to Johnson's writing in the 2013 introductions only strengthens the argument that these goals are achievable. Yet the comparative scarcity of critical attention paid to Quin's writing ensures that such efforts remain focused predominantly on Johnson, perpetuating the view of a one-man avant-garde, an anomaly in the history of the modern British novel. As outlined in the first half of this thesis, such a view diminishes Johnson's role in cultivating a broader culture of literary innovation, and overlooks other significant contributors – such as Quin – to this culture.

As a wilful successor to Joyce and Beckett, and as a critical, ideological and methodological British counterpart to the innovations of the *Nouveau Roman*, Johnson is a figurehead for the group of writers identified throughout this thesis as The New Fiction. As such, when considering Johnson's writing in a new twenty first century context, it is vital to also incorporate the weight of context which connects him with The New Fiction itself, with fellow critics such as Gordon, and with fellow authors such as Quin. It is not only Johnson but the entire critical and creative legacy of The New Fiction which finds new and unprecedented currency, and the critical project to establish Johnson in the twenty first century is incomplete without them. The remainder of this chapter continues to utilise Johnson, alongside both Gordon and Quin, to investigate why The New Fiction finds particular resonance within the twenty first century literary climate.

### 5.3 Critical Comparisons

Much of the critical commentary offered by The New Fiction concerns the mainstream British novel of the twentieth century, and the lingering novelistic models of the nineteenth century on which it is reliant. As discussed throughout the first half of this thesis, at the core of The New Fiction's drive for literary innovation was the rejection of these outdated models as anachronistic and ill-suited for the truthful representation of individualistic contemporary experience. The second crucial pillar of The New Fiction's criticism relates to the emergent technologies of the time, identifying the failures in traditional novelistic methods to account for newly established narrative media. The New Fiction's creation of

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Buckeye, *Re: Quin* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013) p. 6

new forms for the modern novel is motivated in equal part by a desire to use the new media of cinema and mainstream television drama to reinvigorate the form, and to meet challenges presented to its status as vital and contemporary. Though the former of these two arguments is clearly rooted in the specific critical climate to which it belongs, the latter constitutes a broader theoretical observation about the relationships between print novels and emergent technologies. As a dominant feature of The New Fiction's criticism, these arguments are restored to publication at a point in time at which discussions about the future of print, in the face of a vast proliferation of new narrative media, are of utmost prominence to contemporary literary criticism. The opportunity therefore presents itself to compare The New Fiction against some of the twenty first century's most significant arguments about literary innovation and reading technologies, and test the ways in which it is renewed and revitalised by these new associations.

One of the most prominent concerns of literary criticism in the twenty-first century is the threat of obsolescence, both commercial and creative, posed by new technologies to the printed book. Published in 2012, *This is Not the End of the Book* documents a series of conversations on this topic between the novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco, screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, and their interviewer Jean-Phillipe de Tonnac. The book revolves around one central question: Do electronic forms of literature and portable e-reading devices make a strong claim for replacing print fiction? As is evident from the following extract, Eco firmly believes that this is not the case:

At a certain point in time, man invented the written word. We can think of writing as an extension of the hand, and therefore as almost biological. It is the communication tool most closely linked with the body. Once invented, it could never be given up [...] it was like the invention of the wheel. Today's wheels are the same as wheels in prehistoric times. Our modern inventions – cinema, radio, Internet – are not biological.<sup>14</sup>

Eco argues that there is an associative biology, established over generations, in our relationship with writing which is lacking from the wider range of technologically advanced contemporary media, developing from his assertion that "the book is like the spoon, the

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<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière, *This is Not the End of the Book* (London: Vintage, 2012) pp. 7-8

scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved”.<sup>15</sup> One might however extend Eco’s wheel metaphor to argue that “today’s wheels” are in fact not the same as those of “prehistoric times”; the invention of the tyre, for instance, represents an augmentation to the technology of the wheel so pervasive as to be almost synonymous with the wheel itself – as indeed the development of illustration and textual apparatus like tables of contents and indexes become almost synonymous with the book. The tyre, however, represents not a replacement for the wheel itself but an improvement made upon its technology – electronic media likewise represent not replacements for the book, but improvements made upon the biological-technological interface of reading written text. Eco’s observations are reminiscent of Gordon’s focus on “the act and pursuit of writing” in an “image conscious and visually orientated era”,<sup>16</sup> or Johnson’s emphasis on focusing his chosen narrative medium around “those things it can do best”,<sup>17</sup> situating new literature within a trajectory of technological development, and examining its technology in comparison to its contemporary climate. Acts of reading and writing become steps along a sequence of technological progressions that may be potentially rendered obsolete, or (as Eco, Gordon, and Johnson all argue) improved upon and expanded by further innovation.

Carrière responds to Eco by arguing that “we have never needed to read and write as much as we do today. If you can’t read and write, then you can’t use a computer. And you have to be able to read and write in a more complex way than ever before, because we have invented new characters and symbols”.<sup>18</sup> Again, The New Fiction’s arguments may be recalled, Gordon’s assertions about a society “conditioned to read thousands of words every day”<sup>19</sup> reflected and updated for a broader technological climate in Carrière’s commentary. The question which remains as a result of Eco’s wheel analogy is whether indeed the printed text is akin to the modern wheel, a designed-for-purpose combination of components which can be modified and adapted according to the materials used and modes of production, or to the old cartwheel, an outdated mono-functional version for which we no longer have a use. Eco aligns himself to the former, alluding to the adaptive quality of the book when he argues that “books are superior to every other object that our cultural industries have put on

<sup>15</sup> Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière, *This is Not the End of the Book* p. 4

<sup>16</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ p. 10

<sup>17</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* p. 13

<sup>18</sup> Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière, *This is Not the End of the Book* p. 8

<sup>19</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ p. 12

the market in recent years”.<sup>20</sup> Eco’s attribution of “superiority” is again comparative to *The New Fiction*, presenting an updated form of Johnson’s emphasis on the ability of the book to “evolve [...] forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality”.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, and again like Johnson and Gordon, Eco and Carrière’s discussion presents ‘the end of the book’ as a realistic and tangible concern for contemporary authors, audiences, and critics alike.

The opening chapter, named ‘The Book Will Never Die’, continues the stand taken by the title of the book, and Eco and Carrière’s interviewer Jean-Phillippe de Tonnac therein neatly summarises the fine balance this argument must take:

This tribute to the book is simply trying to show that contemporary technologies aren’t likely to render it obsolete. But perhaps we should also put into perspective the progress that some of these technologies are supposed to have made.<sup>22</sup>

*The New Fiction* provides clear and demonstrative examples of the “progress” which de Tonnac refers to, addressing a period of technological growth, the assumption of primacy in the cultural role of storytelling, and a responsive, innovative approach taken by written literature. By making this connection, *The New Fiction* is revealed to provide twentieth century historical context – but more significantly, it also provides practical examples of the processes that Eco, Carrière and de Tonnac describe.

The apparent alternatives to print, offered by websites, e-books, and interactive electronic editions, provide a wealth of content which is arguably more accessible, less expensive for both producer and consumer, and only takes up as much physical space as the device used to read it. Here, too, lies evidence of the “progress” to which de Tonnac refers. As indicated in the following passage from Jeff Gomez’ 2008 book *Print is Dead: Books in our Digital Age*, the positioning of text as accessible content rather than artefact is more than simply a new way to engage with literature:

When looked at in terms of technology, there’s no comparison; even the most rudimentary electronic reading experience offers more features and overall utility than a print book does. So to make the

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<sup>20</sup> Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière, *This is Not the End of the Book* p. 31

<sup>21</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* pp. 16-7

<sup>22</sup> Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière, *This is Not the End of the Book* p. 48

argument that books are great technology (and don't crash and don't lose data, etc.) is the supreme kind of silliness, not to mention it becomes ultimately defensive in nature (because instead of saying what books will do, you end up trumpeting all of the things they won't do) [...] books are indeed primarily the information they contain.<sup>23</sup>

Gomez' position is clear; in relation to even the most basic digital alternatives, the book appears to be an inferior product. Gomez' claim constitutes a tangible threat to the cultural relevance of print fiction, a failure to adapt and survive akin to the technological and formal anachronism of which Johnson accuses the modern British novel in the mid-twentieth century. In stating that "books are indeed primarily the information they contain", Gomez describes the role of print using the language of information technology, establishing the book as purely a mode of delivery for its informational content. He concludes that there is nothing for the print book to contribute to this technological discussion; it is simply less efficient than the instantaneous download options offered by sellers of e-books, lacking in "features and overall utility".<sup>24</sup> Gomez does not rely solely on a perception that books are not commercially or creatively rich enough to endure, but claims that they are fundamentally and ideologically incompatible with the perception of literature in the twenty-first century. This is precisely the circumstance which Eco and Carrière urge the modern writer to avoid, and indeed represents the future to which Johnson, Gordon, and their peers propose creative novelistic counters.

Such a shift has also been recognised amongst other influential literary critics, as demonstrated in the following extract from George Landow's *Hypertext 3.0*:

We find ourselves, for the first time in centuries, able to see the book as unnatural, as a near-miraculous technological innovation, and not as something intrinsically and inevitably human [...] we find ourselves in the position, in other words, of perceiving the book *as technology*.<sup>25</sup>

Writing in 2006 for the third edition of his seminal work, Landow indicates that the explosive proliferation of technology in the twenty-first century has not only redefined the

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<sup>23</sup> Jeff Gomez, *Print is Dead: Books in our Digital Age* p. 23 (London: MacMillan, 2008)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> George Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization: Critical Theory and New Media in a Global Era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) p. 26



ways in which we record and communicate information, but drastically altered our perception of book production as a practice. Arguably, with the emergence of early hypertext, through to e-books and various forms of digital literature, the printed book no longer carries the unique primacy it once held as a medium. Landow argues that because of an explosion of new models for textual production available to the contemporary author, print has become simply one option amongst many, no longer a primary communicative output, and therefore must be subject to technological scrutiny. To address this debate demands an acute awareness of print's technological capabilities, some recognition that the book is *not* the organic mode of human communication which Eco describes, but an artificial mechanism with its own set of technological capabilities and limitations. Despite the implicit disconnect this evokes between the human body and the written or printed word, Landow's argument can be used to soften some of the more alarmist claims from critics such as Gomez. By emphasising the printed medium has its own distinct functions, Landow situates the book *amongst* these other technologies rather than inferior to them. Some critics go further; Kaye Mitchell reads Johnson's writing as holding clear and distinct relationships with technology which hold true in a contemporary technological climate, already realising the adaptive qualities which Landow urges. Mitchell states that the example of *The Unfortunates* is "notably dependent upon its particular materiality, the very palpability of its desire for ordering (and re-ordering)",<sup>26</sup> but goes on to argue for the same simultaneous reading of form, medium, and subject matter as Shlovsky, or James:

Those theorists who have set out to champion the radical and democratising nature of hypertext have sought to effect a wholesale disjunction between print culture and digital culture [...] but this is a highly contentious argument: the literary work as an imaginative space or intentional object is no more 'isolated' than a hypertext, facilitating [...] a meeting of authorial and readerly consciousness in the virtual 'space' of the work, thereby throwing into doubt the boundaries of the work (and so its isolatability). Even as a physical object the text is continuous with a whole set of practices and assumptions from which it cannot be absolutely divorced.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kaye Mitchell, 'The Unfortunates: Hypertext, Linearity, and the Act of Reading' p. 57

<sup>27</sup> Kaye Mitchell, *op. cit.* p. 57

Johnson's writing appears ideally-situated as an exemplar of the ongoing positioning of the printed book amongst newer technologies, with Mitchell indicating some key areas in which the New Fiction's attention to medium and technology is actually sustained by – rather than divorced from – newer inventions, and the newer criticism they provoke. The trajectory beginning with Sholvsky, Modernism and the *Nouveau Roman* is once again sustained into the twenty-first century when the New Fiction is positioned as a connective milestone.

Eco, Carrière, Gomez and Landow recognise major paradigmatic shifts made to reading culture during this time, responding differently to the central notion that print is itself, as a formerly dominant cultural medium, under a significant degree of threat from new technologies. By gradually returning to print throughout this time period, New Fiction authors like Johnson, Gordon, and Quin are repositioned into a contemporary reading culture which echoes and amplifies the concerns of their own time. Both Johnson and Quin write novels which explore the boundaries of narrative, characterisation, and dialogue, but also print itself as an expressive medium. Print is viewed not just a vehicle for delivering text but a form in and of itself with physical, spatial, and metaphorical possibilities. In doing so, they create novels that challenge the broad theoretical argument that the novel in print is rendered obsolete by new technologies, borrowing, adapting, and remediating in response to those technologies in order to devise new literary forms. Though responding to older media, their novels continue to present a valid critique of the pervasive arguments dominating the reading culture in which they are now published. Johnson recognised the print book's loss of cultural primacy in the face of an emergent narrative medium – in 1973, it was mainstream television drama and cinema, whilst in 2006 it is the range of new reading technologies from the birth of hypertext through to portable electronic reading devices and other interactive online texts. Both Johnson and Gordon provide valid counters to Gomez' claims about the cultural and technological anachronism of print books, and both support Eco's and Carrière's arguments that the book can respond, evolve, and adapt to new technologies, developing new writing models. As a case in point, post-millennial criticism by Marie-Laure Ryan on the subjects of hypertext and interactivity employs terminology with clear validity for the reading of New Fiction literature. Describing, for instance, Espen Aarseth's concept of 'ergodic literature', Ryan outlines the hypothetical interactive text as

one employing nontrivial effort on the part of the reader, and summarises the properties of such a text:

An ergodic design is a built-in reading protocol involving a feedback loop that enables the text to modify itself, so that the reader will encounter different sequences of signs during different reading sessions. This design turns the text into a matrix out of which a plurality of texts can be generated. Each new state of the ergodic text is determined by the previous one, and the total run depends on both the initial conditions and on the input that the system absorbs between its states.<sup>28</sup>

Crucially, like Aarseth, Ryan does not exclude the novel from potentially satisfying such a design, and thus invites not just a reading of contemporaneous electronic media, but also historical examples. Other post-millennial Johnson criticism sustains this argument; James, for instance, outlines Johnson's demand that "a reader's engagement [...] can, and should be, immanently performative".<sup>29</sup> Such emphasis on the functionality of the device, relative to the demands of the medium, and in self-conscious dialogue with the reader, clearly satisfies the demands made by Johnson and Gordon of their readers in a manner seemingly missing from their own time of writing. Indeed, Ryan's discussion provides valuable terminology for reading a novel like *The Unfortunates*, addressing not the unorthodox nature of a textual device, but the functions served by its sequences of signs, the input of the reader, and the self-modification of the text. Mitchell once again sustains precisely such an argument:

The utility of this hypertext-influenced approach is that it combines an attention to textual *form*, with a discussion of the way(s) in which that text is *read*; *The Unfortunates* clearly demands such a dual approach (as well as demanding the 'nontrivial effort' and 'work of physical construction' that Aarseth details).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* pp. 206-7 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

<sup>29</sup> David James, *The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in Albert Angelo* p. 30

<sup>30</sup> Kaye Mitchell, 'The Unfortunates: Hypertext, Linearity, and the Act of Reading' p. 59

Additionally, Mitchell advocates “setting aside the pseudo-problems of technology and materiality”,<sup>31</sup> clearly moving away from the superficial manner in which the terminology of experimentalism is used in contemporaneous criticism of Johnson. Mitchell, rather than viewing Johnson as representative of an outdated intellectual investigation into print media, identifies Johnson as providing a model for reading formal literary unorthodoxy which holds clear relevance and application for much newer criticism.

The possibility of engaging critical debate about the death of the book through creative novelistic practice is also addressed in other, illuminating ways at the turn of the millennium. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe the development of any new medium as “doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media”.<sup>32</sup> The logic of Bolter and Grusin’s argument might be extended to imply that electronic reading in its various e-book or app-based forms necessarily demands an updated and improved version of reading as we understand it. Bolter and Grusin, however, reveal the simplification involved in accepting binary definitions of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. They highlight a ‘dual logic’ to the remediation concept: “What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media”.<sup>33</sup> Again, historical examples are not discouraged, and Johnson and Gordon similarly claimed the potential for print to ‘refashion’ itself. To employ Bolter and Grusin’s terms, *The New Fiction* clearly aims to apply a process of remediation, borrowing forms from other media, and in doing so emphasising the unique properties of print to enact such a process.

To further the point made by Bolter and Grusin, N. Katherine Hayles identifies a similar intermediary relationship between print and digital texts, in 2002’s *Writing Machines*:

I do not mean to advocate that media should be considered in isolation from one another. On the contrary, media constantly engage in a RECURSIVE dynamic of imitating each other, incorporating aspects of competing media into themselves while

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (London: The MIT Press, 2000) pp. 14-5

<sup>33</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *op. cit.* p. 15

simultaneously flaunting the advantages their own forms of mediation offer.<sup>34</sup>

Hayles emphasises the importance of incorporating tangible elements of a text's construction into its reading. The artifice of print is described as a vital aspect of how a text is interacted with – the interface between biology and technology described by Eco is again seen as a crucial component in the way one engages with printed text, rather than the pure informational conduit described by Gomez. Hayles acknowledges, like Bolter and Grusin, not just a digital medium's capability to incorporate aspects of an older medium like print, but a parallel exchange in which print engages other media:

As the vibrant new field of electronic textuality flexes its muscle, it is becoming overwhelmingly clear that we can no longer afford to ignore the material basis of literary production. Materiality of the artifact can no longer be positioned as a subspecialty within literary studies; it must be central, for without it we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies.<sup>35</sup>

Hayles demands that print be recognised a perennially developing medium, directly in dialogue with emergent technologies. The *New Fiction's* present publication places it in dialogue with twenty-first century arguments, and situates them firmly within this trajectory.

Jessica Pressman develops the argument for a mutually progressive view of print and emergent technologies further still, in her 2009 essay 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-first Century Literature'. Pressman describes the 'Aesthetic of Bookishness' as:

[...] an emergent literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment. These novels exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies. They define the book as an aesthetic form whose power has been purposefully employed by literature for centuries and will continue to be far into the digital age.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (London: The MIT Press, 2002) p. 30

<sup>35</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* p. 19

<sup>36</sup> Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-first Century Literature' In: *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2009

Pressman's argument avoids breaking the discussion into binary oppositions of 'old' or 'new' media, or viewing the physicality of books as a stumbling block to its inclusion in a conversation about technology. As indicated by Bolter and Grusin, and by Hayles, it is more relevant to address the trajectory of two forms of media which continue to develop contemporaneously, in dialogue with one another, rather than in opposition. Pressman expands on this by asserting that the print novel *requires* challenging dialogical exchange with other technologies in order to stay relevant, describing it as "a medium in need of the threat posed by the information revolution in order to remain innovative".<sup>37</sup> In arguing this, Pressman proposes the relationship between the two to be not just productive, but essentially symbiotic. Perhaps the key aspect of Pressman's argument is the specific identification of the novel as a crucial medium through which this relationship can be explored.

It is a prominent feature of twenty first century literary criticism to examine print *as technology*, investigating the novel's history of incorporating the threat of obsolescence, and the potential for augmentation posed by technology, as part of its formal composition. Whether it is argued by Eco and Carrière in 2012, Pressman in 2009, Landow and Hayles throughout the first decade of the 2000s or Bolter and Grusin at the very eve of the millennium, the conclusion appears similar: the novel has historically stayed afloat by retaining a fluid, adaptable approach to engaging other media. Evidently, it is possible to identify a movement in contemporary writing that emphasises the range of functions and capabilities solely available to the medium of print. The movement is progressive rather than retrogressive; it does not rely on nostalgia, it does not appear anachronistic, nor does it make any attempt to slow the tide of technological advancement. Instead, we find evidence of novelists using the rapidity of this 'information revolution' to their advantage, responding to and using contemporary technologies as a source of invention and innovation.

The early Twenty-first Century is by no means the first time that an awareness of the artifice of book production – the recognition of print *as technology* – has emerged as a vital influence over literary critics and authors. Nor, indeed, does arguing in favour of the technology of the book need to become "defensive in nature". To both statements, this chapter poses the same counter: the book may be examined in terms of its artifice, its

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<sup>37</sup> Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-first Century Literature'

mechanism, and in relation to other media forms, and this position is supported by a critical trajectory which traces back more than half a century through Eco, Carrière, Pressman, Hayles, Landow, Bolter, Grusin, Johnson's and Gordon's *New Fiction*, and Sarraute's and Robbe-Grillet's *Nouveau Roman*. The New Fiction constitutes a significant part of this critical trajectory, and their criticism is situated at a crucial point in its development during the twentieth century.

#### 5.4 Twenty First Century Writing

The New Fiction is a valuable precursor and resonant contribution to twenty first century criticism. An assessment of its ongoing contributions to the understanding of contemporary creative practice can be similarly achieved by comparing The New Fiction's novelistic methodologies with others developed during the millennial period. Broader critical discussions draw on examples from contemporary literature, presenting the devices and characteristics that accommodate the 'experimental' label. The New Fiction's republication affords additional opportunities to make comparisons with such writing, using their creative works to compare methodologies, and their criticism to expand their formal, linguistic, and technological implications. The remainder of this chapter highlights the comparative potential Johnson and Quin hold amongst a wider body of twenty first century writing.

In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Gibbons identifies multimodality as a potential characteristic of writing described as experimental. Multimodal literature is therein defined as:

A body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives. Such works are composed not only of words, type-set on the page in block fashion [...] they experiment with the possibilities of book form, playing with the graphic dimensions of text, incorporating images, and testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object.<sup>38</sup>

Paying particular attention to the twentieth and twenty first centuries, Gibbons uses these criteria to create a taxonomy of multimodal literature, grouping authors according to particular characteristics and devices exhibited by their writing. Comparisons between

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<sup>38</sup> Alison Gibbons, 'Multimodal Literature and Experimentation' p. 420 In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 420-34

Gibbons' definition of the multimodal and Johnson's definition of the innovative are evident, each giving the visual and the physical parity with more traditionally novelistic narrative and linguistic devices. Johnson's "physical tangible metaphor" appears to satisfy Gibbons' definition of multimodal writing comprehensively – and indeed carries with it a weight of cultural criticism and text-technological commentary which lends valuable context to such definitions. Johnson is clear about not just the nature but the ideological purpose of his devices, the rationale behind the testing of limits, and Gordon's *Beyond the Words* reiterates and reinforces these arguments for The New Fiction as a whole. Whilst Johnson's selection of writers whose works "matter" is brief and deliberately flippant, Gibbons' taxonomy provides a useful starting point for highlighting key authors and specific devices employed in writing of this kind.

In discussing 'tactile fictions', it is noteworthy that Gibbons selects Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *The Unfortunates* (1969) alongside more recent authors, Robert Coover's 'Heart Suit' (2005) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). The texts demonstrate "books that play with form in a way that both emphasised their materiality and makes readers engage with them in notable physical ways".<sup>39</sup> Coover's text is presented in the form of a deck of cards and, like *The Unfortunates*, is intended to be shuffled and read in any order. *Tree of Codes* extends a device used in *Albert Angelo*, the die-cut window ominously revealing the death of Marlowe through several of Johnson's pages becomes, in Foer, a comprehensive treatment of the novel form in which every fragile page bears windows through to the many more beneath it. Also highlighted is Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*, a 150-page novel of randomly-ordered and individually-loose pages originally published in 1961. Saporta's novel was republished by Visual Editions and recontextualised for a twenty first century audience in 2011 with an introduction by Google creative director Tom Uglow and an interactive app which shuffles the 150 facsimile pages of Saporta's novel. In terms of his devices and methodologies, Johnson sits comfortably alongside Saporta, Coover, or Foer. As previously noted, however, the inclusion of Johnson in such a list carries, in the context of this thesis, a certain degree of critical baggage which warrants further attention. There are clear opportunities to apply The New Fiction criticism, which underpins Johnson's writing, to

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<sup>39</sup> Alison Gibbons, 'Multimodal Literature and Experimentation' p. 428



newer works, and test whether his rationale for formal innovation and the close examination of text in a technological climate, truly has a place in twenty first century criticism.

The New Fiction potentially occupies other territory also outlined in Gibbons' taxonomy. The subsection on 'altered books and collage fictions' refers again to *Tree of Codes*, this time considering its composition as an alteration of a pre-existing novel, Bruno Schultz' *Street of Crocodiles*. Additionally, Gibbons cites Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1980), a literary oracle comprising visual alterations and poetic compositions derived from – and drawn or painted directly onto – the text of W.H. Mallock's *A Human Document*. Tracing literary collage techniques back to Max Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté*, Gibbons also cites Michael Betancourt's *Artemis* (2004) and *Two Women and a Nightingale* (2004), and Graham Rawle's *Diary of an Amateur Photographer* (1998) and *Woman's World* (2005). Alan Burns' *Dreamerika!* (1972) and *Babel* (1969) would also sit well alongside these examples, each employing cut-ups, collages, and alterations from existing texts. Such an inclusion would invite, via Burns' New Fiction contextual association, a comparison between the methodology of alteration and collage to the borrowing of forms, and the close association between innovative literature and its contemporary technological climate (such as Gordon's brief examination of the influence of news print on a general reading culture). Similarly, Gibbons' discussion of 'concrete/typographical fictions' prioritises twenty first century works such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Tomasula's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002) or Stephen Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007). Both Johnson and Quin also exemplify the way in which "the varying quality of type as well as the white space of the page is exploited".<sup>40</sup> Johnson employs blank page space to narrative effect frequently, an absence of text commonly representing an absence or slowness of thought. In *House Mother Normal* (1971), for example, the various monologues of Johnson's nine chronologically-aligned narrators include wide textual spacing to represent faltering memory, and the scattering of text across the page in moments of panic or confusion. Large sections of the page are left entirely blank when a narrator is unconscious, unable to communicate, or actively ignoring the various abuses ongoing in the care home they share, leaving the reader to piece together events based on the other narrators' accounts. Quin, too, employs space in this manner, the textual remediation of a stop-start tape recording in *Three* (1966) including

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<sup>40</sup> Alison Gibbons, 'Multimodal Literature and Experimentation' p. 431

blank space concordant with the time between each statement, and the typographic spacing of the male protagonist's diaries in *Passages* (1969) ranging from tight and precise at times of tension, and wider and looser in his more languid moments. Examining such devices alongside their twenty-first century equivalents would bring The New Fiction into line with the commercially successful and critically-acclaimed innovative writing which has succeeded them.

The broader range highlighted here provides useful evidence of a wider field of innovative novelistic practice in the twenty first century – and comparisons between these writers and those collected under The New Fiction clearly open up certain areas of focus demanded by The New Fiction criticism. They are however very general in nature, and a closer focus on specific works and devices used solidifies the efficacy with which such a reading can be made. Pressman, for example, introduces Steven Hall's 2007 novel *The Raw Shark Texts* with clear intent to examine its textual and technological engagements:

No contemporary novel has responded with such vigor to the fears of the dark, fathomless depths of digital culture by presenting the book as a defense against it than British author Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*.<sup>41</sup>

The sinister depths which Pressman describes are those of technological obsolescence, and Hall is cited as an author who demonstrates the printed book to hold firm against it. Indeed, *The Raw Shark Texts* is identified throughout Pressman's essay as a text which engages the technological threat both in terms of its narrative and its physical composition and constitution. Snapping at Hall's protagonist Eric's heels is The Ludovician shark, a relentless predator hungering not for flesh, but for ideas, sniffing out thoughts, memories, and concepts, and ripping them from its prey. Pressman neatly connects The Ludovician to the apparent looming threat posed by technology, describing it as "a conceptual and literary manifestation of the ways in which data mutate across spaces, platforms, and interfaces".<sup>42</sup> Hall engages with this notion in a number of ways, using the physical space and depth of the book to present the shark; concrete prose crafts the creature's shape through typography, and flip-book animation allows it to physically emerge through the turning of pages.

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<sup>41</sup> Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature'

<sup>42</sup> Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature'

The combination of textual, visual, and physical devices used to portray The Ludovician occupy territory identified by The New Fiction to be key for the novel's evolution. Hall, for instance, acknowledges the close relationship his novel has with cinema, whilst also asserting the inherent bookishness which ensures the primacy of print, in an interview with *Structo* from 2012:

It intentionally uses a lot of cinematic language. I made some people quite cross when it came out because I think they misunderstood and thought it was a glorified screenplay, that it was something that was written to get some kind of Hollywood blockbuster. It does use a lot of cinematic language, but if you look at the mechanics of it, it's fundamentally un-filmable.<sup>43</sup>

The mechanics Hall refers to are his plays between page-space and narrative, which mould Hall's shark into a distinctly Johnsonian metaphor. The Ludovician dramatises the text-technology relationship through narrative whilst also embodying it formally. With this in mind it is perhaps no surprise that Eric finds safety in stories, and in paper, learning both figuratively and physically to surround himself with words and texts to confound and confuse the predator.

The terminology used by Johnson, Gordon, and their peers – that of innovation without the experimental label, the borrowing of forms and vocabularies from other media, and the physical metaphor – lends clarity and critical context to some of Hall's own comments on this aspect of the novel. As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, Johnson moves rapidly between forms throughout *Albert Angelo*, borrowing from cinematic, dramatic, journalistic, and pedagogical forms. Johnson makes clear his purpose to create novelistic devices thoroughly tested and well-suited to each section's purpose. Evenson and Howard describe Quin's writing in similar terms, stating of *Passages* that "narration functions like an invasive camera, with actions and events unfolding cinematically",<sup>44</sup> indicating Quin's employment of remediation and borrowed forms but also tying it to the clear novelistic intent to invoke an uncomfortable voyeurism in her writing. The New Fiction demands that the reading of such devices extends beyond the superficial recognition of

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<sup>43</sup> Steven Hall, 'Structo talks to Steven Hall' para. 19 of 27  
<http://structomagazine.co.uk/interviews/steven-hall/> [accessed 28/04/15]

<sup>44</sup> Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard, 'Ann Quin'

unorthodox, and instead focuses on the purposeful design they embody, and the narrative metaphors they create. Hall demands a similar reading of *The Raw Shark Texts*, stating:

I hate the idea that everything beyond straight, left to right text is somehow a gimmick. Sometimes it can be, sometimes people put things in books just to be eye-catching, but the entire story is about what happens to the text, the fact that the text can morph into something else. It's the text itself that's dangerous and unreliable and tricky, and it's unreliable in every conceivable way: Eric is unreliable, and the book is unreliable because it can turn into a fucking shark and come straight at you. So that is the book as much as the story is the book, or as much as the characters are the book. The visual aspect is the book.<sup>45</sup>

In this extract, Hall confirms that the synthesis between narrative and form is integral to his aims – and that achieving this demands more than mere visual gimmickry. The imminent threat posed by technological usurpation is quelled by stories themselves, written narrative deftly combined with a close attention to the very technologies which supposedly threaten them.

Another significant example of a contemporary author engaged in textual and technological symbiosis is Jonathan Safran Foer who, when discussing *Tree of Codes* in an interview for *Vanity Fair*, initially demonstrates perhaps the fetishism and nostalgia for print to which Gomez so strongly objects;

I started thinking about what books look like, what they will look like, how the form of the book is changing very quickly. If we don't give it a lot of thought, it won't be for the better. There is an alternative to e-books. And I just love the physicality of books. I love breaking the spine, smelling the pages, taking it into the bath. . .<sup>46</sup>

*Tree of Codes* is however a serious interrogation of the physicality of books, constructed entirely through a process of erasure from the Bruno Schultz novel *Street of Crocodiles*, mechanically die-cut and bound, achieving an aesthetic similar to that of collage or sculpture. Later in the *Vanity Fair* interview, Foer indicates his affinity with another vital

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<sup>45</sup> Steven Hall, 'Structo talks to Steven Hall' para. 22 of 27

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, in Heather Wagner, 'Jonathan Safran Foer Talks *Tree of Codes* and Conceptual Art' <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2010/11/jonathan-safran-foer-talks-tree-of-codes-and-paper-art> [accessed 14/01/13]

aspect of contemporary literary criticism which relates to the allusions of disembodiment suggested by Landow and the necessity of embodiment argued by Hayles:

I love the notion that “this is a book that remembers it has a body”. When a book remembers, we remember. It reminds you that you have a body. So many of the things we may think of as burdensome are actually the things that make us more human.<sup>47</sup>

Hayles’ discussion of embodiment is recalled in this discussion, Foer suggesting that by drawing attention to the physical, sensory engagement of a human being with a printed book, one combats the illusory detachment of body and text made possible by the digital. Foer makes it very clear that his ambition in designing the form of this particular text is not to denounce or fight against the advancement of technology, but simply to remind his audience that the emergent technologies themselves provoke the creations of viable alternatives. More than this, Foer indicates that, as novelist, the notion of embodiment serves as a kind of affirmation – a way of retaining a sense of humanity amidst the rise of Hayles’ digitised and disembodied ‘posthuman’.

Both Hayles and Pressman make specific critical analysis of writing by twentieth and twenty-first century novelist Mark Z. Danielewski, indicating his writing to exemplify the mutual exchange of ideology and methodology between books and newer technologies described previously. In *Writing Machines*, Hayles introduces Danielewski’s debut novel, *House of Leaves*, as a book “extend[ing] the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age”.<sup>48</sup> Hayles’ statement is directly analogous to The New Fiction’s demonstration of new literary forms for the print novel in the face of emergent media in their own time. In doing so, Hayles reinforces the claim that an engagement with new media and search for the new is driven not by experimentalism, but by novelistic practice. Pressman makes similar observations, arguing that, in Danielewski’s writing, “books become aesthetic objects that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction by connecting their book-bound body to the virtual world of digital information”.<sup>49</sup> Engaging reality and fiction, and doing so by way of an interrogation of the book-artefact’s corporeality against other technologically-advanced media, appears to be a central component of Danielewski’s

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *op. cit.* para. 27 of 27

<sup>48</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* p. 112

<sup>49</sup> Jessica Pressman, ‘The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature’

writing. That Danielewski is highlighted to demonstrate such features in twenty first century writing begs the question whether, if *The New Fiction* is indeed to be read from a twenty first century perspective, there are ideological and methodological comparisons to be made between their writing and a newer author like Danielewski.

Evidenced particularly by his inclusion in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, many critical readings suggest that Danielewski may be identified and categorised as a particularly innovative author, by virtue of the particular devices and techniques employed in his work. Natalie Hamilton describes *House of Leaves* as “a work of experimental fiction that, as a textual artifact, incorporates color, photos, graphics, and a unique textual layout, and is even cross-referenced with a musical album”.<sup>50</sup> In his examination of the poetics of metafiction,<sup>51</sup> R.M. Berry combines self-consciousness and formal unorthodoxy under the banner of experimental writing, including *House of Leaves* amongst several examples of American experimental writing since 1984.<sup>52</sup> Gibbons summarises a range of forms and devices in multimodal literature, of which she cites Danielewski:

They ask us to reassess what a book is in physical terms. In doing so, they are perceptually and ontologically challenging. It is this challenge, their intense synaesthetic aesthetics, that makes them both enjoyable and experimental.<sup>53</sup>

Appendices i and ii of this thesis demonstrate that the key characteristics observed in Danielewski’s writing in this body of criticism are indeed pertinent. Appendix i illustrates the range of formal devices employed in *House of Leaves*, including footnotes both internally and externally referential, typographic alignment and spacing including text presented upside-down and in clearly-delineated sections, and a mixture of written styles

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<sup>50</sup> Natalie Hamilton, ‘The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’, p. 3 In: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 50, No. 1, 2008 pp. 3-16

<sup>51</sup> R.M. Berry, ‘Metafiction’ p. 136

In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* pp. 128-40

<sup>52</sup> Berry lists Danielewski alongside Paul Auster, Ronald Sukenick, Kathy Acker, David Markson, Carole Maso, Ben Marcus, David Foster Wallace, Brian Evenson, Michael Martone, Steve Tomasula, Lidia Yuknavitch and Leslie Scalapino, as well as Samuel Beckett, Flann O’Brien and Jorge Luis Borges from outside the U.S.

<sup>53</sup> Alison Gibbons, ‘Multimodal Literature and Experimentation’ p. 433

In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* pp. 420-34

including traditional fiction, academic and scientific non-fiction, and lists. Appendix ii similarly illustrates the range of devices employed throughout *Only Revolutions*, demonstrating its employment of narrative verse, dual page numeration, lists, and typographic devices including coloured, bold, italicised, and inverted text. Despite the sheer density of unorthodox literary devices, claims of experimentalism as the key to reading such devices are, as indicated by earlier writers such as those of The New Fiction and the *Nouveau Roman*, questionable. It is, indeed, for the same reasons listed by Berry, Gibbons, and Hamilton that earlier writers like Johnson, Gordon, Nathalie Sarraute, or Alain Robbe-Grillet declare their writing *not* to be experimental. The reassessment of the physicality of books, and the intensity of the aesthetic challenges made, are claimed by Gordon to be vital characteristics of the novel's perpetual search for the new, as embodied by The New Fiction and their *Nouveau Roman* predecessors. For them, and perhaps also Danielewski, the novel is not a rhetorical exercise or an incomplete line of inquiry; by the time of publication, experimentation is a long-finished process. Its inquiry is formally and ideologically realised and, most importantly of all, the resultant singular artefact is identifiably a novel. The New Fiction contributes significantly to the existing critical framework for reading such twenty first century works, by placing emphasis on the formal, technical devices of innovative writing, whilst challenging existing definitions through the ideological rejection of the experimental label. Danielewski's fiction is ideally situated both formally and critically to demonstrate such a reading.

## 5.5 Summary

New Fiction works satisfy existing methodological criteria which characterise 'experimental writing'. Ideologically, however, the comparison is not straightforward; The New Fiction rejects the terminology of experimentalism outright, and self-identifies as writing with mainstream ambition. The methodological comparison raises the question whether this aspect of The New Fiction constitutes a challenge to the ways in which 'experimental writing' is identified, or provides a viable alternative. Just as Chapters Three and Four of this thesis used The New Fiction to present readings of B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin respectively, the following chapters employ The New Fiction to read from a selection of twenty first century authors. Chapter Six examines two novels by Mark Z. Danielewski,

connecting the author's own commentary on the use of print to remediate and reimagine the role of the book to the arguments developed from *The New Fiction* through to the early 2000s. In doing so, the connections identified in this chapter are sustained throughout the reading of a twenty first century novelist, establishing clear lines of comparison which reinforce the continued relevance of *The New Fiction* and its associated authors. Chapter Seven makes a similar examination of writing by Jonathan Safran Foer, again considering the efficacy with which *The New Fiction* provides valuable critical and contextual insight into two Foer novels. Both chapters aim to meet Johnson's challenge: to avoid the language of experimentalism; to consider the relationship each text has with its technological climate, and to introduce the devices of the selected writing in terms of "literary rationale" and "technical justification".<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> B.S. Johnson, 'Introduction' p. 19



## Chapter 6: Mark Z. Danielewski and The New Fiction

### 6.1 Introduction and Critical Overview

By contrast to the relative obscurity of Quin, Johnson, and their New Fiction contemporaries (particularly in their own time), Mark Z. Danielewski is an American writer to whom literary criticism, mainstream journalistic review, and commercial appeal have been extremely favourable. Danielewski's writing is the central subject of edited collections including Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons' *Mark Z. Danielewski* (2011) and Sascha Pöhlmann's *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski* (2012), and features prominently in broader studies of contemporary innovative writing such as N. Katherine Hayles' *Writing Machines* (2002) and *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), Mark B.N. Hansen's *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with New Media* (2006), Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan's edited collection *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (edited by Bray, Gibbons and Brian McHale, 2013), and Mark C. Taylor's *Rewiring the Real: In Conversation with William Gaddis, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, and Don DeLillo* (2013). An example of the range of visual and textual devices which Danielewski employs throughout his debut novel, *House of Leaves* (2000) is provided in Appendix i, demonstrating the use of typographic spacing and layout, colourisation, and footnoting, as well as the multiplication of narrative voices and styles. A closer examination of the textual and formal properties of this novel will be made later in this chapter. A second example of Danielewski's challenging approach to the form and medium of the print novel is provided in Appendix ii, demonstrating the linguistic construction, colourisation, page segmentation and unusual graphic and typographic design which characterise his second novel, *Only Revolutions* (2006). Again, an examination of the devices employed in this novel is made later during this chapter.

Rather than the accusations of gimmickry and opacity suffered by Johnson, Quin and their New Fiction fellows, Danielewski is often afforded more technical readings which consider the carefully-designed unorthodoxy of his works without relying on the language of experimentalism. Michael Hemmingson, for example, explores Danielewski's use of the footnote (again demonstrated in Appendix i) and places *House of Leaves* amongst other

texts which are “labelled ‘experimental’”,<sup>1</sup> with an emphasis on the use of the term as an application of a label rather than an inherent property of the text. Brigitte Félix examines “a physical and poetic interaction between the written text and the printed book”<sup>2</sup> in *Only Revolutions*, focusing on the deliberateness of form and medium rather than the less determinate ‘experiment’. Brian McHale cites Danielewski as a creator of narrative worlds “pluralized and foregrounded through *vertical* proliferation by nesting secondary ‘micro-worlds’ within the primary narrative world, for instance introducing stories-within-the-story [...] or by means of ekphrastic descriptions of remediations of artworks”.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, McHale also touches upon the connections between such recent innovative works and their twentieth-century predecessors, arguing:

When metafiction of the sixties and seventies are placed alongside formally innovative fictions published in the U.S. during more recent decades [...] it becomes clearer that what fictional self-consciousness and formal experimentation share is a common acknowledgement of their medium’s autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

McHale focuses on self-conscious formal innovation, identifying experimentation as a methodological approach rather than a characteristic outcome. Additionally, McHale identifies a particular focus on the ability of such writing to refresh and renew the form, this “autonomy” constituting a meeting-point between experimentation and literary self-consciousness, a critical summation which he shares with Johnson and Gordon. In doing so, McHale expands upon the lineage of contemporary American innovators by tracing such experimentation back through a European literary tradition. Alongside American writers John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, McHale cites the Italian writer Italo Calvino and British novelist David Mitchell as technically comparable examples from across the Atlantic, as well as making particular reference to the *Nouveau Roman*, citing Robbe-Grillet, Jean Ricardou and Claude Simon. Félix’s, Hemmingson’s, and McHale’s readings each focus on specific formal and technical properties of Danielewski’s writing, examining

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hemmingson, ‘What’s Beneath the Floorboards: Three Competing Voices in the Footnotes of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’ p. 284 In: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 52, No. 3, 2011 pp. 272-87

<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Félix, ‘Three Hundred and Sixty: Circular Reading in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions*’ p. 193 In: *Études Anglaises* Vol. 63, No. 2, 2010 pp. 191-203

<sup>3</sup> Brian McHale, ‘Postmodernism and Experiment’ p. 147 In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* pp. 141-53

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

relationships with the conventions of narrative and form, and the medium of print, without using 'experimental' as a categorical term applied to the resultant works. Furthermore, there is a wider body of literary criticism on Danielewski's writing that suggests its categorisation as experimental writing is inaccurate, associating him more closely with those lesser-known writers who explicitly reject it<sup>5</sup>.

Writing on *House of Leaves*, N. Katherine Hayles refers to Danielewski's devices as explorations of the "combinatoric possibilities constituted by the physical and conceptual configuration of page-space".<sup>6</sup> Hayles avoids a discussion rooted in the experimental, describing instead the "materialist strategies"<sup>7</sup> which situate Danielewski's novel at the heart of a discussion about the novel and other narrative media:

What distinguishes *House of Leaves* is the way it uses familiar techniques to accomplish two goals. First, it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age; second, it recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, *through the processes of remediation themselves*, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel.<sup>8</sup>

Hayles' examination of *House of Leaves* in *Writing Machines* primarily considers its status as a novel, and its exploration of the relationship between print and contemporary media. Hayles' reading can be used to build upon the more general claims about the future of print novels by Johnson. Where Johnson urges a focus on what the novel can "still do best", Hayles reads Danielewski to be "showing what print can be", a literary goal made more complex by the digital age in which Danielewski is writing but identifiably an extension of those same goals outlined by Johnson and his New Fiction contemporaries. Further still, where Johnson writes in favour of the borrowing and adaptation of forms from other media, Hayles uses the terminologies of remediation coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe this very process at work in *House of Leaves*.

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<sup>5</sup> See also N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (2002), Caroline Hagood, 'Exploring the Architecture of Narrative in *House of Leaves*' (2012), Brian W. Chanen, 'Surfing the Text: The Digital Environment in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*' (2007), Josh Toth, 'Healing Postmodern America: Plasticity and Renewal in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*' (2013), and N. Katherine Hayles, 'Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*' (2002).

<sup>6</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *op. cit.* p. 168

<sup>7</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* p. 110 (London: The MIT Press, 2002)

<sup>8</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *op. cit.* p. 112

Though the application of remediation theory is a significant expansion on the discussion presented by *The New Fiction*, accounting for a much wider range of narrative media, it maintains similar focus on how other technologies can be a strengthening factor in an author's firmly print-novelistic goals. Various readings presented in Bray and Gibbons' *Mark Z. Danielewski* support the association Hayles makes between Danielewski and other media forms. Paul McCormick, for example, discusses the influence of cinema in the writing, formal composition, and commercial marketing of *House of Leaves*. He asserts:

*House of Leaves* uses the new forms of that so-called old medium, cinema, as an interface with its media environment. This interface offers fresh formal affordances for the novel and ultimately functions as a third term to disrupt the simplistic binary between old and new media – suggesting that older media like cinema and the novel are often the most flexible, the most dynamic and, in those important ways, the newest media in their environments.<sup>9</sup>

McCormick's argument goes slightly further than Hayles' – and certainly further than Johnson's or Gordon's – by envisaging the reflexivity of the novel in relation to newer media not as recovery or recuperation, but as reinforcement of the perennial newness of which the form is capable. McCormick goes on to argue that Danielewski

disrupts prevalent cultural oppositions between old and new media: first, by representing the formal affordances offered by that old medium, cinema, and second, by demonstrating his skill in remediating those historically contingent affordances.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst Johnson's and Gordon's assertions in the mid-twentieth century would address the on-going contemporaneity of the novel following the emergence of new media, critical readings like McCormick's and Hayles' abandon the oppositional binary between old and new media altogether. Occupying a significantly earlier period of time, the *New Fiction* can in light of this be argued to have accurately predicted a direction for the critical understanding of technologically-engaged writing; a move away from an opposition between 'old' and 'new', towards a process of constant remediation which sustains the essential contemporaneity of all media.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul McCormick, 'House of Leaves, Cinema and the New Affordance of Old Media' p. 55-5 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 52-67 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Johnson's arguments about a productive relationship between media may be limited by the comparatively narrow band of technologies emergent at his time of writing, but he is nevertheless critically astute in asserting that the novel's search for the new is realised by processes which twenty-first century critics name and recognise as remediation. Similarly Gordon, reflecting on print fiction's relationship with news publications and the elevation of casual reading beyond literary and intellectual appreciation, anticipates a readership influenced by a multitude of intersecting and dialogic forms, and the ability of the novel itself to freely navigate this network. McCormick and Hayles both identify that the novel form holds key strengths and prerogatives in encountering and appropriating other media in order to refresh and renew itself, and *The New Fiction* recognised this same process, creating new novels and new forms engaged with a new media environment. McCormick goes on to suggest that the strength of engagement Danielewski in particular makes with other media is tantamount to proof that the labels of 'old' and 'new' cease to apply in this context, instead placing emphasis on a "total media environment"<sup>11</sup> in which the modern novel operates. This perspective on the novel, the abandonment of oppositional 'new' and 'old' media definitions in favour of a more dialogic model, not experimental but perpetually new, characterises the twenty-first century critical context in which *The New Fiction* finds itself republished, and to which it demonstrably contributes.

Whilst *House of Leaves* occupies much of the critical attention paid to Danielewski's writing, and in addition to Hayles' and McHale's readings the body of criticism concerning his second novel *Only Revolutions* suggests that an extended application of New Fiction principles to the critical reading of his wider body of work is possible. Where *House of Leaves* employs a wide range of forms, borrowed and remediated (see Appendix i), *Only Revolutions* demonstrates a more comprehensive and singular application of form. Each physical end of Danielewski's novel represents one of two narrators, who mirror and mimic one another linguistically, stylistically, and typographically, and are entwined by the physical rotation of the book itself (see Appendix ii). Hayles describes Danielewski's "transformations and deformations"<sup>12</sup> of the novel as "a profound shift from narrative as a temporal trajectory to a topographic plane upon which a wide variety of interactions and

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<sup>11</sup> Paul McCormick, *op. cit.* p. 55

<sup>12</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, 'Mapping Time, Charting Data: The Spatial Aesthetic of Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* p. 159 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 159-77

permutations are staged”.<sup>13</sup> Similarly to McHale’s view of narrative layering, Hayles argues that rather than following the singular and mono-dimensional temporality of traditional, chronologically linear narrative, *Only Revolutions* encourages a wider range of reading practices by providing multiple narrative planes with which the reader interacts. Gibbons writes, of *Only Revolutions*, that “The novel’s temporal structure problematizes a linear unfolding of time and narrative events. So too does the reader’s interaction with the book”.<sup>14</sup> The multiplication and problematisation of narrative, and interaction between reader and physical text, take place simultaneously as direct products of the novel’s formal devices. Making this equation between form and thematic narrative inquiry, Hayles’ and Gibbons’ readings make for apt comparison to Johnson’s notion of a “physical tangible metaphor”. Hayles similarly identifies the methodical and determinedly narrative nature of Danielewski’s approach to form:

*Only Revolutions* manifests what I have called its allways ontologies. The page layout, narrative structure, dedication, and reading process all work towards this end, generating a multivalent topography of time and space in which spatio-temporal planes appear to both interact and stand in isolation.<sup>15</sup>

Hayles and Gibbons both examine the ways in which Danielewski’s visual and literary devices combine and contribute to a common purpose, again focusing on the time and space of the reading experience. In this, Danielewski’s text appears reminiscent of the “single artefact” to embody a singular “contemporary vision” which Gordon ascribes to literature which at the time of his writing is new, innovative and yet by the same logic not experimental. Indeed, the presence of a critical readership which is responsive to the literary goals underpinning Danielewski’s inventive approach to form indicates his writing to be “successful” according to Johnson’s conditions. The specific strategies employed by Danielewski can be read as engagements with media and assertions of newness through a creative and combinatoric approach to the novel form, a methodology demonstrably present throughout the history of innovative writing, and notably by Johnson, Quin, and their contemporaries. Whilst historical context for such a reading has been established,

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Alison Gibbons, “You Were There”: The Allways Ontologies of *Only Revolutions*, p. 167 In: Sascha Pöhlman (ed.), *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*, pp. 167-182 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012)

<sup>15</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Mapping Time Charting Data’ p. 180 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 160-77 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

The New Fiction warrant inclusion within that context more than ever since their twenty-first century republication.

Despite the differences in mainstream readership and critical reception between Danielewski and the much earlier Johnson or Quin, one can uncover sympathies that Danielewski expresses – knowingly or otherwise – with The New Fiction ethos. Like Quin, Danielewski does not write literary criticism, but reveals much of the ideology behind his devices through a range of interviews. The comparison between Danielewski and The New Fiction is clear in an interview conducted by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Graham:

I would hope that my love of words – their meanings, their sounds, and certainly their visual embodiment – comes through, as well as my sense that all this talk one hears today about the death of the word and the irrelevance of books and print is way, way premature.<sup>16</sup>

Danielewski indicates his belief that the book is by no means dead and, similarly to Johnson, connects this to an appreciation for language and its embodiment in the medium of print. Bray and Gibbons confirm as much in their introduction to *Mark Z. Danielewski*, asserting that Danielewski's commentary in the McCaffery and Gregory interview reveals his writing to negotiate "a fine balance between the medial and the material".<sup>17</sup> Form and style once again come to the fore, and Danielewski expresses this in an interview with Sophie Cottrell:

[...] books don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page [...] Words can also be colored and those colors can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards. [...] But here's the joke. Books have had this capability all along.<sup>18</sup>

Danielewski's intentions here seem clear; to emphasise those creative options offered uniquely by print and paper, and to prove that print is not so "limited" as newer

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, in Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'Haunted House: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski' p. 117 In: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Literature* Vol. 44, No. 2, 2003 pp. 99-135

<sup>17</sup> Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons, 'Introduction' p. 2

In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 1-13

<sup>18</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, in Sophie Cottrell, 'A Conversation with Mark Danielewski'

<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0400/danielewski/interview.html> [accessed: 28/02/12]

technologies might make them appear. Hansen draws particular attention to this interview, stating that “For Mark Z. Danielewski, perhaps the central burden of contemporary authorship is to reaffirm the novel as a relevant – indeed newly relevant – cultural form”.<sup>19</sup> Hansen’s reading of Danielewski describes a medium that is adaptable and accommodating of the supposed threats posed by new media. Hansen implies this characteristic to be distinct to the 21st century, but in *The New Fiction* – and predecessors dating back at least as far as Sterne – there is a clear historical context to the “central burden” which Hansen identifies. Danielewski’s ‘joke’ is one marker along a continuing trajectory of innovation in print literature, bearing clear similarities to Johnson’s statement about how “the novel may not only survive but evolve to greater achievements”.<sup>20</sup> The cultural moment that Hansen describes supports Danielewski’s “reaffirmation” of the novel form, but also demonstrates the predictions made by *The New Fiction* about the “evolution” of the book through such means to be accurate, affording them a prominent place along that same trajectory.

There is further convergence between Danielewski and *The New Fiction* with the notion that an innovative approach to the novel form does not necessarily constitute an experimental one. In particular, *The New Fiction* raises questions about the application of the term ‘experimental literature’ to writing that employs and adapts the novel form in its engagement with other media, an activity which Danielewski continues to exhibit. Indeed Danielewski, like Johnson and Gordon, suggests that these possibilities have always been available to authors who would choose to exploit them. *The New Fiction*, informed by a reading of Shlovsky, provides ample rationale for doing so; to draw attention to artifice of form serves, in this case, to self-consciously reference the relationship between media, and to extend and direct the reader’s perception towards this relationship in a manner unavailable to more traditional literary realism. Johnson and Gordon expressed their endless frustration that so few sought to explore these avenues and that the writing that did undertake such explorations seemed unacceptable to mainstream readership. By contrast, in the twenty-first century, Danielewski is able to revel in the fact that he has an audience of readers who are ready and capable to receive this material:

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<sup>19</sup> Mark B. N. Hansen, ‘The Digital topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s ‘House of Leaves’’ p. 597 In: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2004 pp. 597-636

<sup>20</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?* p. 12 (London: Hutchinson, 1973)



Whether it's dealing with magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, and of course the Internet, most people living in the 90s have no trouble multi-processing huge sums of information. They may not know it but they're doing it. It's the same as walking or looking for movie times, we're all involved--for the most part unconsciously--in a massive, usually successful, mental juggling act, simultaneously sorting national stories, shopping lists, the sounds of a neighbor speaking a language we don't understand, music we'd like to understand better, the image on a poster, and all this mixed in with our appetites, emotional murmurs, and frequently the sudden appearance of a seemingly random recollection. Really the only thing challenging about my book is the idea of a book itself.<sup>21</sup>

It seems particularly relevant to compare the extract here to another statement from Giles Gordon that “we’re conditioned, because we lead such busy lives, to read these words – whether in newspaper or book – as fast as we’re able to assimilate them”.<sup>22</sup> Shlovsky’s terminology of automatisisation applies closely to Gordon’s understanding of contemporary readership in this extract, and his solution – wilful estrangement and thus the demand for greater perceptual effort on the part of the reader – appears closely related to Danielewski’s own goals. Danielewski’s argument is updated for the twenty-first century, accounting for a much wider range of media, proposing the writing of novels for a readership which routinely, automatically encounters a mass of multimedia and textual information. Danielewski demands focus on print’s capabilities, in the face of other narrative media which would instead automatise and decrease such attention. Danielewski asserts that writing which explores such a relationship need not be seen as “challenging”, and is thereby positioned in accordance with Gordon’s argument that such writing “cannot be experimental or avant garde. It can only be itself, a work of fiction”.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Danielewski’s list of items in our collective “mental juggling act” is itself reminiscent of the concerns of The New Fiction writers: national stories are prominent in such examples as Burns’ *Dreamerika!* or Quin’s *Tripticks*; functional lists are employed by Josipovici in *The Inventory*, by Johnson in *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* and by Quin in *Three*; found imagery is used in Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* and Burns’ *Dreamerika!*; “random recollection” is the main topic at hand for Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* and sections of *House Mother*

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, in Sophie Cottrell, “A Conversation with Mark Z. Danielewski”

<sup>22</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ p. 12 In: Giles Gordon (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 9-15 (London: Hutchinson, 1975)

<sup>23</sup> Giles Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 15

*Normal*; the multitude of languages, appetites, and “emotional murmurs” neatly characterises Quin’s entire body of work as well as Figs’ and Davie’s short stories; and the influence of music, and indeed other media including film and the visual arts, is prevalent across the entire body of work encompassed by *The New Fiction*. To borrow Danielewski’s words, the only challenge presented by each of these concepts is the idea of the book itself, and by extension the novelistic intent to reimagine literary form and style in order to accommodate these ideas.

In an interview for the *New York Times* website by Motoko Rich, Danielewski reveals an apparent affinity with *The New Fiction*’s cause:

As excited as I am by technology, I'm ultimately creating a book that can't exist online [...] The experience of starting at either end of the book and feeling the space close between the characters until you're exactly at the halfway point is not something you could experience online. I think that's the bar that the Internet is driving towards: how to further emphasize what is different and exceptional about books.<sup>24</sup>

Danielewski declares his intention to create connections and contrasts between the embodiment of text and language within the book form, and a bombardment of multimedia information. Crucially, despite the development of e-readers since this interview, *Only Revolutions* remains exclusively available in print form at the time of writing this thesis, reinforcing Danielewski’s claim of creating a book which cannot exist digitally. The new technological context in which the book finds itself in the twenty-first century clearly emphasises and reinvigorates the critical and ideological cause laid out by *The New Fiction*. For Danielewski, like Johnson and Gordon, the print novel engages in dialogue with other media, and in doing so asserts the strengths and capabilities that are exclusively its own. Beyond the methodological, formal and stylistic similarities, one of the central tenets of *The New Fiction* is supported and sustained by Danielewski’s assertions almost forty years later, in timely coincidence with their republication.

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<sup>24</sup>Motoko Rich, “Digital Publishing is Scrambling the Industry’s Rules”  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/books/05digi.html?scp=7&sq=danielewski&st=Search> [accessed 17/04/12]

In the McCaffery and Gregory interview, Danielewski indicates just how closely his writing in *House of Leaves* is aligned with predecessors like Johnson, and even earlier writers whom Johnson himself acknowledged as influences:

*House of Leaves* has been praised as a wonderful “experimental novel”, but really it would be unlawful for me to accept such a description. Anyone with a grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation. The so-called “originality” claimed by my commentators must be limited to my decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarmé, Sterne, B.S. Johnson, Cummings, Hollander, etc., etc. – and of course Hitchcock, Welles, Truffaut, Kubrick, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

This statement links Danielewski to the broader tradition of literary experimentation, tracing through the twentieth century with Hollander, Cummings, and Johnson towards Mallarmé in the nineteenth century, and Sterne in the eighteenth century. Danielewski includes Johnson in a list of admired writers from whom he acknowledges borrowing, amongst the more widely-recognised historical innovators cited in the existing criticism. Precedent for the inclusion of Johnson amongst the other named writers exists, for example, in Johnson’s recognition of Laurence Sterne’s influence on Johnson’s own understanding of the novel form and the storytelling function.<sup>26</sup> Danielewski’s declaration of an “unlawful” application of the experimental label to his novels, and his refusal of a claimed “originality” owing to his methodological borrowing from his predecessors clearly reiterates arguments made by Johnson and his contemporaries. That Danielewski recognises the influence of cinema in equal measure to literature further reinforces this connection, the borrowing of form from other media espoused by Johnson et. al. still evidently a method held in high regard by a twenty-first century writer. These comparisons invite a distinction between the new, the original, and the experimental. The New Fiction argues that the appropriation of forms from other media, and indeed from the history of the novel, does not constitute experimentation, but is an integral part of asserting the form’s newness. Danielewski’s statement reaffirms that an examination of these processes may, as Johnson before him demanded, avoid the labels of experimentalism and originality

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, in Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, ‘Haunted House: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski’ p. 106

<sup>26</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* p. 13

in favour of a focus on this newness. Neither Danielewski nor Johnson are truly original in their use of literary forms and devices, both demonstrably borrowing and appropriating from a well-documented history of literary innovation. Yet, like Johnson, Danielewski creates a coherent, methodologically and ideologically realised model for writing, which draws from its contemporary media environment asserting newness and contemporaneity, and also from its predecessors – a list to which *The New Fiction* belongs.

Danielewski provides evidence that the arguments at the core of *The New Fiction* remain valid and active in the work of an innovative and best-selling contemporary author – a connection strengthened by Danielewski's recognition of Johnson as a significant literary forebear. Both assert that new writing is created by the combination of appropriating one's predecessors in a new technological context, and it is on this basis that certain technical and thematic comparisons can be made, not only to Johnson, but also to Quin, and the entire New Fiction group. In Danielewski's fiction, the principles of narrative craft encouraged by *The New Fiction* between 1960 and 1975 are rejuvenated, made applicable in their new publication context alongside new media such as the internet, and at the cutting edge of twenty-first century writing. The remainder of this chapter uses examples from *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* to demonstrate some key points of convergence and technical comparisons which situate *The New Fiction* in a prominent position amongst Danielewski's predecessors.

## **6.2 *House of Leaves* (2000)**

Danielewski's debut novel *House of Leaves* uses an array of literary forms and styles, a complex pattern comprising a framing narrative attributed to Johnny Truant, within which is an exegesis and critical discussion of a film entitled 'The Navidson Record' attributed to Zampano, which further frames the narrative of that (fictional) film. Several other presences permeate this complex narrative arrangement including Johnny's mother Pelafina, whose letters and poetry are presented alongside an exhaustive appendix of supplementary textual material, and The Editors, whose commentary at times illuminates and at others contradicts Johnny's. Within its multiple narrative frames, *House of Leaves* also borrows from a vast range of forms, including transcription, ekphrasis, remediation of film, music, and photography, and also mimics scientific non-fiction, epistolary writing, and

concrete writing in both poetry and prose. As Paul McCormick describes, *House of Leaves* “thoughtfully and audaciously engages with the American media environment of its time”.<sup>27</sup> Quin’s complex treatment of style, form, and characterisation, and her use of epistolary forms, remediation, and annotation could be considered particularly innovative in her own time, and *House of Leaves* is ripe for formal and stylistic comparison. Equally, Johnson’s carefully-designed employment of multiple forms and styles to serve specific, identifiable literary goals is exemplary of The New Fiction, and Danielewski makes for an effective twenty-first century counterpart.

The early pages of *House of Leaves* see Johnny Truant in the role of frame narrator, initially explaining how he came to find and compile Zampano’s ‘Navidson Record’ text. At this stage his narrative presence is absolute, and his first-person address introduces the sensation of terror that has entered Johnny’s life since beginning his grand editorial endeavour. Soon shifting form to present the full text of ‘The Navidson Record’ itself, footnotes and annotations ensure that Johnny’s ongoing narrative is maintained throughout, telling his own stories and detailing his relationship with the text. The following extract demonstrates Johnny’s narrative voice: It takes the form of a footnote in which Johnny’s response to an exclamation of “hey, the water heater’s on the fritz”<sup>28</sup> is written in first-person address to the reader:

<sup>18</sup>I got up this morning to take a shower and guess what? No fucking hot water. A pretty evil discovery especially when you’re depending on that watery wake-up call, me being massively dehydrated from a long night drunk my road-dog Lude and I winged our way onto last night. As I’m remembering it now, we somehow ended up at this joint on Pico, and soon thereafter found ourselves in conversation with some girls wearing black cowboy hats, supposedly lost in their own private-blend of brain-hatching euphoria—Thank you Herbal Ecstasy—prompting us to put a little Verbal Ecstasy on them which would, as it turned out, ultimately lead them giggling into the night.

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This extract does much to characterise Johnny’s narration, initially connecting the failure of the Navidson family’s water heater to his own lack of hot shower before making a lengthy and disjointed summary of his night-time activities. Despite appearing consistent with his first-person narration, implicitly addressing the reader with a “guess what?” before

<sup>27</sup> Paul McCormick, ‘House of Leaves, Cinema, and the New Affordances of Old Media’ p. 52 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons, (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 52-67

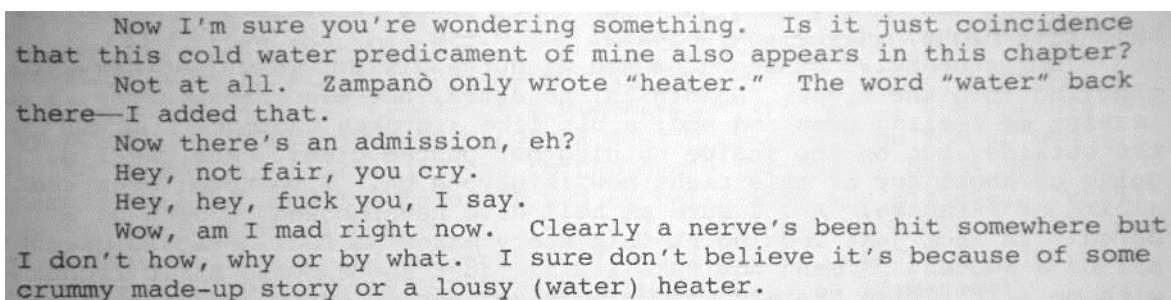
<sup>28</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* p. 12 (USA: New York, NY, Pantheon Books 2000)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

revealing his connection to Zampanò's text, Johnny's narration is complicated by a dependence on his faltering memory. Stating himself to be "massively dehydrated from a long night drunk", and hedging specific details with the adverbs "somehow" and "supposedly", Johnny's long run-on sentences resemble Quin's creation of a fragmented narrative perspective. Responding to his own rhetorical question with expletive and colloquial language akin to Johnson's 'Disintegration', there are linguistic and stylistic similarities in Johnny's unreliable memory, and inclination towards the fantastical.

Quin's use of annotations and unassigned narrative voices produces conflict, resulting in a composite of narrative perspectives operating within an individual narrator. Johnson explores similar notions, though reaches a different technical solution, presenting in *Albert Angelo* a physical separation between events taking place inside and outside of his protagonist's mind. In *The Unfortunates*, Johnson devises a mechanism for accessing different strands of the narrator's observations and memories at random. Danielewski similarly applies a combination of forms, using footnotes to affix Johnny's commentary to an ongoing narrative whilst modifying language and style to complicate the relationship between them. Recalling Hayles' commentary on the "stacking" of narrative planes, each of these writers avoids linear narrative in favour of creating a three-dimensional narrative space in which reading practices can interact. Quin and Johnson thus act as critical and creative predecessors to the terminologies later developed by Hayles, and to the creative methods employed by Danielewski.

The subjectivity of Johnny's framing narration is incompatible with the purportedly exegetical function of 'The Navidson Record'. Johnny admits to the reader that he has amended Zampanò's material to suit his own authorial purpose:



Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there—I added that.

Now there's an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say.

Wow, am I mad right now. Clearly a nerve's been hit somewhere but I don't how, why or by what. I sure don't believe it's because of some crummy made-up story or a lousy (water) heater.

30

<sup>30</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 16

By admitting his adjustment, Johnny takes on a distinctly authorial role, which calls his reliability as narrator into question. Continuing with a first-person address, Johnny presents the reader with questions and indicates his own willingness to defy the reader by aggressively renouncing his presumed narrative reliability: the “hey, not fair” that he attributes to the reader’s voice is met with an insolent “hey, hey, fuck you”, condemning the presumption that he will be a ‘fair’ narrator. Danielewski’s treatment of dialogue again closely resembles that of Quin in this extract, and comparisons to “metafiction of the sixties” made by McHale are strengthened by the inclusion of New Fiction writers. This is particularly evident in Danielewski’s complication of the typical turn-taking of written dialogue, using free direct speech. The line “now there’s an admission, eh?” comes from Johnny as first-person narrator, and the following “hey, not fair” is attributed – by Johnny – to “you” in a reporting clause (making this free direct speech, though not in the free-est form). It follows that, “Hey, hey, fuck you” is attributed to Johnny (as “I” in another reporting clause), yet the next line, “Wow, am I mad right now” is complicated by the continuation of the paragraph in the first-person. Johnny anticipates anger and frustration, and the unsettling of the relationship between narrator and reader is only confirmed by the casual dismissal of his own narration as a “crummy made-up story”, and his apparent oversight of the omission of the word ‘know’ (“I don’t how, why, or what”). Whether “a nerve’s been hit” in Johnny or for the apostrophically-addressed reader remains unclear, and the roles of narrator and reader are disrupted by Johnny’s authorial acts. As evidenced in Chapter Five of this thesis, Quin’s dialogue between Leonard and Ruth in *Three* similarly disrupts the assumption of a traditional alternation between speakers<sup>31</sup>.

In shattering the illusion of a reliable framing narrator, Danielewski’s techniques also resemble Johnson’s, placing Johnny into an authorial role that directly challenges the reader in a manner akin to the ‘Disintegration’ of *Albert Angelo*. Johnson reveals the artifice and fictionality of his own writing through a new and unidentified narrator who, posing questions directly to the reader and consistently referring to himself in the first person, appears to represent the authorial voice itself: “Albert defecates for instance only once during the whole of this book: what sort of a paradigm of the truth is that?”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* p. 170  
(London: Picador, 2013)

Danielewski similarly exposes the unreliability and artificiality of his novel's principle narrator: "The word 'water' back there – I added that. Now there's an admission, eh?" Johnny is telling stories and therefore, to borrow from Johnson, telling lies and contradicting the ostensibly editorial nature of his project. The effect of both Johnson's and Danielewski's expository writing is an example of Sarrautean suspicion of authorial convention, asserting the novelistic convention of an authoritative, framing narrative voice to be unreliable in and of itself. The typical relationship of trust established between reader and narrator is broken, the reader made aware of the artifice present in the narrative he presents, and in doing so Danielewski ensures that there are no conventional means by which to judge the putative authenticity of 'The Navidson Record'.

Johnny's adoption of an authorial role is again evident in an entire section of text which Zampano has attempted to remove from the Navidson Record, but which Johnny has restored as is indicated by its presentation as red struck-through text. Zampano compares the growing maze of hallways in Navidson's house to the Labyrinth myth, and hypothesises on the origins of the Minotaur. Taking the Minotaur as an allegory for a grotesquely deformed human, Zampano suggests that the Labyrinth represents repression of trauma and, in particular, the disconnection or rejection of child from parent:

~~At the  
risk of stating the  
obvious  
no woman can mate with a  
bull and produce a child.  
Recognizing this simple scientific fact,  
I am led to a somewhat interesting  
suspicion: King Minos did not build the  
labyrinth to imprison a monster but to  
conceal a deformed  
child — his child.~~

33

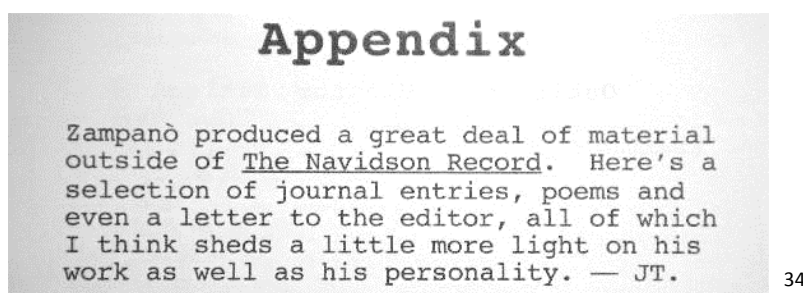
In a further similarity to Quin, this material makes these connections in the form of classical allegory. As seen in Chapter Five of this thesis, the diaries of Quin's male protagonist in *Passages* are accompanied by notes on ancient Greek artefacts that mirror the tense relationship between he and his female companion. In this extract, Danielewski

<sup>33</sup>Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* p. 110



presents a reading of the Minotaur myth which itself holds symbolic weight for his own troubled protagonist. The physical layout of the text is imbued with connective imagery, a concrete arrangement of text taking the shape of a key as if to imply its inclusion as a 'way out' of the labyrinth, and a solution of sorts to the puzzle of Johnny Truant. Rather than directly *telling* the story of the relationships at the heart of their respective texts, both Quin and Danielewski instead provide their readers with allegory from which such narrative may be derived – further evidence in both writers' work of negotiation between Hayles' topographic narrative planes. Danielewski expands this technique, presenting these sections of text as editorial inclusions on the part of his narrator, originally omitted from the putative source text. Again operating as if authorially, Johnny restores these passages of text, reinforcing both his ownership of the version of 'The Navidson Record' he presents to the reader, and his narrative connection to it. In addition to his existing roles as narrator, editor, and author, Johnny may also now be read *within* Zampanò's narrative, as well as providing its frame; an example of a "micro-world" becoming consistent with the world which frames it.

Perhaps the most jarring stage of Johnny's narrative evolution occurs with the putatively extra-textual material supplied alongside 'the Navidson Record' in *House of Leaves*. The Appendix is separated from the main body of *House of Leaves* by its bold titling, in a different format to each prior chapter heading. Herein Johnny introduces a series of appendices – again in his characteristic Courier font – which he suggests to be enlightening in regards to Zampanò's body of work:



Various formal devices are employed which complicate the relationship between the appendices and the main body of text. The page numeration of *House of Leaves* continues sequentially throughout, as indeed does the attribution of specific fonts to represent particular narrative voices, providing a consistency with the rest of the text that confirms

<sup>34</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* p. 537

that this is a continuation rather than something separate. Johnny's role is however reduced, leaving this section almost devoid of footnotes. Johnny is conspicuous by his absence: where in the main body of the novel he is quick to draw lengthy and enthusiastic comparisons between Zampano's writing and his own backstory, he offers no comment on his insertion of a "[sic]" notation into Zampano's outline for 'The Navidson Record',<sup>35</sup> his restoration of '~~The Minotaur~~' to the list of possible chapter titles,<sup>36</sup> or the complete absence of 'The Song of Quesada and Molino' for which he nevertheless provides a section,<sup>37</sup> Even more disruptively authorial is Johnny's restoration of the following quotation:

"Forgive me please for including this. An old man's mind is just as likely to wander as a young man's, ~~but where a young man will forgive the stray, an old man will cut it out. Youth always tries to fill~~

~~the void, an old man learns to live with it. It took me twenty years to unlearn the fortunes found in a swerve. Perhaps this is no news to you but then I have killed many men and I have both legs and I don't think I ever quite equaled the bald gnome Error who comes from his cave with featherless ankles to feast on the mighty dead."~~<sup>173</sup>

38

Footnote 173 in this extract then links not sequentially to the footer of the page, but is to be found on page 137 of *House of Leaves*, where this quotation is repeated verbatim as an extract from Zampano's personal journals, alongside a complex arrangement of footnotes and counter-footnotes attributed to Johnny, Zampano and The Editors:

<sup>172</sup>Illegible.  
<sup>173</sup>You got me.<sup>176</sup> Gnome aside, I don't even know how to take "I've killed many men." Irony? A confession? As I already said "You got me."<sup>174</sup>  
<sup>174</sup>For reasons entirely his own, Mr. Truant de-struck the last six lines in footnote 171. — Ed.

<sup>175</sup>See Appendix E.  
<sup>176</sup>See Appendix B.  
<sup>177</sup>For instance, youth's peripatetic travails in *The PXXXXXXX Poems*; a perfect example why errors should be hastily excised.<sup>178</sup>

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Here, Johnny states "You got me",<sup>40</sup> expressing confusion at Zampano's apparent first-person confession or ironic treatment of "killing many men". Although opening

<sup>35</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 539

<sup>36</sup> Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 540

<sup>37</sup> Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 555

<sup>38</sup> Danielewski, *op. cit.* pp. 546-7

<sup>39</sup> Danielewski, *op. cit.* pp. 137-8

connections via footnotes to a wide range of appendices including Zampano's own poems (noted in this extract as "*The PXXXXXXX Poems*"), Johnny continues to instruct the reader; the double-entendre "you got me" also appears to confirm the presence of Johnny *within* Zampano's text as narrative subject, the old man apparently predicting the inclinations of the younger, begging forgiveness for "including this", and seemingly allegorising the restoration of his erroneous wanderings of mind as "forgiving the stray" and "filling the void". In this case Johnny again becomes a fictional subject within Zampano's narrative, primarily through allusions which Johnny himself invites. Consequently, Danielewski's arguably most complex formal device in *House of Leaves* is in fact one of his least visually striking. The attribution of narrative voice is made complex and disorienting through the arrangement of form created by the employment of footnotes. Whilst this particular application of form justifies technical comparisons, such as those made by Berry or McHale to contemporary American writers like David Foster Wallace, The New Fiction provides the critical and contextual basis for further connecting such comparisons to a lengthier trajectory. Rather than inventing a new form, Danielewski finds an application of an existing form which serves metaphorical and narrative purpose, in line with The New Fiction's tendencies to appropriate and manipulate written form to lend embodiment to their narrative aims.

Further evidence of the continuing relevance of The New Fiction in reading the formal machinations of *House of Leaves* can be found in a second set of appendices, a collection of letters from Johnny's late mother Pelafina. These letters reveal Pelafina's guilt over her incarceration, her separation from Johnny, and physical harm she caused in his childhood:

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 137

[illegible]

Once again, these visual devices work in line with the premises championed by The New Fiction and can be read and interpreted in terms of the narrative goals they achieve. In this extract, the shifting text sizes alter the emphasis for Pelafina's repetitious message, exaggerating the reading of the unspoken event to be accidental, to be an anomalous occurrence, or to be one of a number of incidents. Formally, this extract demonstrates repetition to be symptomatic of Pelafina's madness, similar in technique to Quin's treatment of Sandra in 'The Unmapped Country',<sup>42</sup> or Johnson's character George Hedbury in *House Mother Normal*.<sup>43</sup> A natural comparison emerges between Pelafina and *Three's S*, both of whom are represented in the form of textual remnants, which establish them as a destabilising force for the ones who have outlived them. This is again achieved largely through the treatment of form *as* narrative, both texts incorporating the use of unusual typographic spacing and sizing into an otherwise recognisable epistolary form, to serve additional narrative and metaphorical purposes. Further comparison is certainly possible with Albert's students in *Albert Angelo*, with the modifications of the typographic surface of the page made to suit their spoken and hand-written contributions. Though not attending to the entire scope of *House of Leaves* (as, for instance, an example of horror fiction, influenced by the gothic), The New Fiction provides valuable context and the vocabulary to describe its formal processes and apparatus, without identifying Danielewski's novel to be experimental in nature.

Recalling Robert Nye's assertion that *Doubtfire* "is not 'about' schizophrenia, it IS schizophrenia",<sup>44</sup> Pelafina's letters do not simply describe or narrate her madness, but constitute an embodiment thereof. Danielewski employs form and typography in tandem

<sup>41</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. 627

<sup>42</sup> Ann Quinn, 'The Unmapped Country' p. 255 In: Giles Quin (ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* pp. 252-74 (London: Hutchinson, 1975)

<sup>43</sup> B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* p. 144 (London: Picador, 2013)

<sup>44</sup> Robert Nye, Letter to Marion Boyars 13/05/1966, Box 51, Folder 1, Calder & Boyars mss.

with the written textual content akin to a collection of short and self-contained Johnsonian “physical metaphors”. Hansen’s reading supports such comparison, highlighting the more subjective, perceptual narrative created by Danielewski:

Everything in this complex and rich novel-including everything that smacks of traditional realism (the investment in disturbed family dynamics, the oscillation among various focalizers, and so on) is in the end subordinated to the task of posing the challenge of interpretation to the reader. The novel works, on the far side of orthographic recording, not by capturing a world, but by triggering the projection of a world – an imaginary world – out of the reader's interpretive interventions.<sup>45</sup>

Hansen sees Danielewski as avoiding the traditionally realist, representative act of “capturing a world”, and instead creating interpretive possibilities by which the reader may “project” a world. In this, Danielewski is again comparable to the avoidance of mere storytelling encouraged by *The New Fiction*; one can see similar projective techniques in Quin’s combination of “what-happened” narratives and “how-it-felt” formal devices, Johnson’s “physical metaphors”, or indeed the creation of “new models” encouraged by Figs and “new paradigms of truth” espoused by Nye. Hansen’s reading supports the referencing of New Fiction arguments, particularly noting the subordination of realist tropes to alternative, interpretive ways of reading.

The formal innovation at work in Danielewski’s debut novel is demonstrably, reminiscent of *The New Fiction*, exploring and embodying narrative themes for which traditionally linear storytelling would not suffice and emphasising the possibilities of form, style and language offered by printed text. Both Danielewski and New Fiction writers like Johnson and Gordon self-consciously position their work in relation to formal innovations made throughout the history of the novel, their own inventiveness coming through recognising, appropriating, and recontextualising. Joe Bray discusses Danielewski’s bringing-together of multiple formal and typographic innovations, recognising that:

For all its spectacular inventiveness, *House of Leaves* cleverly draws for many of its visual effects on techniques which have been part of the history of the novel since its inception.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mark B. N. Hansen, ‘The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s “House of Leaves”’ p. 603

<sup>46</sup> Joe Bray, ‘Concrete Poetry and Prose’ p. 305 In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* pp. 298-309

Bray cites several pertinent examples to demonstrate this claim, referring in particular to Johnson's *Albert Angelo* and those texts of great influence which Johnson himself cited, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The need for the novel to be indeed 'novel' is again reinforced; the consistent reinvention of form to encourage sustained readership attentive to form and medium, alluded to by Shlovsky as well as Johnson and Gordon, is revisited here by Bray in regards to Danielewski. By way of example, Bray refers to lengthy sections of *House of Leaves* which adopt a concrete form when following Will Navidson – the titular character of 'The Navidson Record' – as he descends further into the void growing from within his house. As the corridors grow thinner, so too does the physical layout of text upon the page, a device Bray observes to "present mimetically the journey of the characters through a mysterious, ever-expanding hallway".<sup>47</sup> Some pages bear only a few words of text when the space described becomes claustrophobic, and the pace of reading naturally quickens as the physical space around the text constricts it. As the ground beneath Navidson pitches and yaws, so again does the text, presented in conflicting, angular layouts of different sizes and shapes requiring the book itself to be turned and manipulated. Bray's emphasis on mimesis implies that Danielewski brings the experience of reading the text in line with the characters' experience of navigating this space, a concurrence with Johnson's arguments in favour of presenting readers with experiential narratives and embodiments of subject matter, rather than telling them stories. Additionally, Marie-Laure Ryan recognises the purposeful and deliberate nature of Danielewski's visual innovations, arguing that "*House of Leaves* is a narrative presented in book form, but its graphic design subverts the sequential reading protocols traditionally mandated by both narrative and books".<sup>48</sup> Ryan's observation further facilitates the application of Johnson's and Gordon's argument that a subversion of traditional narrative models, carefully designed with novelistic intent and intermedial dialogue in mind, is not experimental, but further evidence of the novelistic search for the new.

Contemporaneous critical readings reveal that *House of Leaves* is, as Danielewski claims, designed to use the paper it is printed on to reflect other aspects of narrative beyond simply the story it tells through textual content. Danielewski uses a range of formal

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Impossible Worlds' p. 373 In: Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* pp. 368-79

and stylistic devices to unsettle and complicate Johnny's role as frame narrator, exposing Johnny's authorial intentions, faltering memory, flair for the melodramatic and disregard for editorial convention. In doing so, and as Hayles observes, the narrative of *House of Leaves* demonstrates an interrogation of, and negotiation between, readerly practices. Additionally, Danielewski draws from other media, one key example being the remediation and exegesis of cinema through written text and graphic design – making *House of Leaves* a novel actively engaged with the media environment to which it belongs. The New Fiction provides a historical context, and a critical ideology by which these devices can be identified and interpreted, writers like Johnson and Quin acting as antecedent examples of those same principles. Crucially, The New Fiction encourages a focus on the narrative goals which these devices reinforce, without the requirement to define a subject text as an experimental work. Even at its most formally unorthodox, much of *House of Leaves* continues to operate via the machinations of paper and print, particularly addressing the editorial processes of compilation and collaboration as a vehicle to convey narrative, and the responsive nature of print encountering, mimicking and remediating other media forms. In this case, the presentation of the content through this highly charged narrative conceit adds many additional, internal dimensions to its textual content by marrying together form and narrative – exhibiting the precision of language, explication of thought and exploitation of medium demanded by Johnson, Quin, and their New Fiction fellows.

### 6.3 Only Revolutions (2006)

*Only Revolutions* tells the tale of Sam and Hailey, two American teenagers on a road trip across the United States. Permanently in a state of teenage arrogance and angst, the pair become a force of nature blustering through an often harsh and hostile environment. As discussed by Joe Bray in his essay '*Only Revolutions* and the Drug of Rereading', "it is impossible to outline the plot of this novel without alluding to its form".<sup>49</sup> The text itself, narrated by both Hailey and Sam in long narrative verse, is indeed an exercise in intricate formal invention. Each end of the book begins with a full-page 'S' or 'H' to signify which narrator is speaking, with the main body of text split horizontally throughout between two ninety-word sections per page, creating three hundred and sixty words for each double-

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<sup>49</sup> Joe Bray, '*Only Revolutions* and the Drug of Rereading' p. 202 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 200-215 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

page spread alongside separate marginal annotations. The upper portion of each page represents the chosen narrator, whilst the text of the lower portion is inverted, attributed to the other narrator, and is to be read later in the narrative as the book is rotated. It is recommended in the publisher's notes that the reader takes a chapter of eight half-pages at a time, before rotating the book and reading the alternate chapter belonging to the other narrator<sup>50</sup>. Sam and Hailey present a narrative which is almost structurally, linguistically, and stylistically identical, presenting the same scenes from different perspectives, causing the overall narrative structure of *Only Revolutions* to progress, by alternation, from end to middle in both directions before crossing over and working outwards. The overall sensation of reading *Only Revolutions* can be literally dizzying, requiring the book to be constantly rotated, the two narrators to be alternated between, and their respective narratives to play a game of catch-up depending on which the reader chooses first.

Once more reminiscent of the interrogation of structure, form and narrative espoused by The New Fiction, the inherency of the codex form to such a work is evident: formal comparisons can be made concerning the manner in which *Only Revolutions* uses its body as a Johnsonian "physical metaphor". There are also thematic comparisons to be made between *Only Revolutions* and Quin's *Passages* as novels that primarily relate the sensational and perceptual experience of their narrators rather than objective and reliable narratives. Hailey and Sam endlessly contradict one another, never settling on the names of other characters, the vehicle(s) they drive, or their destination. It is this pacey, repetitious subversion of traditionally objective subject matter in which the strongest comparisons between Danielewski and Quin can be found; putative narrative events, like the perceptions and experiences of both authors' characters, are a blur from which narrative may be interpreted and projected, but never objectively established.

Immediately clear to the reader upon completing the first pair of chapters is the unusual, compound form of narration at work in *Only Revolutions*. Both Sam and Hailey's narratives are similar in structure, evident not only in the formal constraint of ninety-word sections but also the mirroring of one another's linguistic and stylistic habits. Particular

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<sup>50</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions*, interior sleeve note (London: New Directions, 2006)



observations and turns of phrase are frequently shared by both narrators, evident for example in the following extracts during which they meet one another for the first time:

Overcomes her. She  
hyperventilates. Bends agonized.  
What hurt I deliver with just a  
hatless shuffleandflap. When  
suddenly by a wild of only Wind,  
I strangely blurt:  
—*I Promise I'll never leave you.*  
Flash follows, searing lime to wide.  
Fascinating.  
She curtsies.  
—*I'm Hailey. Hi.* <sup>51</sup>

disaster. Only by his panicky  
squawk am I overcome.  
With laughter. Heaves.  
Doubling over. Wheezing.  
What calamity I bring with just a  
shoeless pirouette. When  
by Flash, searing lime to wide,  
I weirdly demand:  
—*I Wish you'd just chill.*  
A Wind follows.  
Curious.  
He bows.  
—*Hi. I'm Sam.* <sup>52</sup>

Both narrators' dialogue is signified by a long dash and italicised text, and the letter 'o' is coloured gold for Hailey, and green for Sam. Textually, Sam and Hailey's narration reiterates as it alternates; Hailey's curtsy is met by Sam's bow, her wheezing by his hyperventilation, and similar comparisons are presented between "hurt" and "calamity", "curious" and "fascinating", and a "hatless shuffleandflap" paired with a "shoeless pirouette". Elsewhere in the text, for both narrators all pronouns and references to other characters are fully capitalised, except for Sam and Hailey's own names, whilst nouns signifying plants and animals are presented in bold text, and the character The Creep is named in purple text. McHale describes such parallelism as a "play of identity and difference, repetition and variation".<sup>53</sup>

The two interconnected (yet clearly interior) monologues indeed parallel one another so closely that they might be viewed as inseparable. There are however contrasts between them, as the light-hearted "laughter" is reflected by the rather less jovial "hyperventilates", and "blurt" is paired with the similar but implicitly more aggressive word "demand". Sam's "My severity burning out her possible plans" counters Hailey's "My

<sup>51</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. S8 (London: New Directions, 2006)

<sup>52</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *op. cit.* p. H8

<sup>53</sup> Brian McHale, 'Only Revolutions, or, The Most Typical Poem in World Literature' p. 152 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons, *Mark Z. Danielewski* pp. 141-58

serenity wipes out his gall”; the rhyme of “severity” against “serenity” maintains phonetic similarity yet indicates characteristic semantic opposition rather than synonymy. The complication of narrative voice presented in *Only Revolutions* comes into sharper focus by examining the comparisons and contrasts between Hailey’s and Sam’s narration more closely.

The same format used to indicate Hailey and Sam’s dialogue is used to represent the voices of animals and plants with which Sam and Hailey respectively communicate:

So what if Silky Lupine,  
Holly and Woodland Stars flutter:  
—Mercy.  
And Larches, Berseem and  
Raspberries wutter:  
—Charity.  
And Snowline Spring Parsley  
bludder: —Humility.

54

Even if Silver Grizzlies,  
Whimbrels and Snipes grunder:  
—Humility.  
And Sandhills Hornets, Pine  
Weevils and Wolf Spiders munder:  
—Charity.  
And Least Flycatchers  
blegger: —Mercy.

55

In these extracts, Danielewski displays a dialogue form reflecting the compound of internal and external communication which exists throughout the novel. Quin often merges the two, establishing faint or non-existent lines between putative narrative events and her characters’ fantasies, examples being the female protagonist of *Passages* envisaging the sex and violence of her relationship with the male, or Greb, the protagonist of *Berg*, enacting but not committing patricide. Johnson more commonly uses form to distinguish between the internal and the external whilst presenting them to the reader simultaneously, employing columns, page breaks and authorial interjections throughout *Albert Angelo*, and using blank space to separate between remembered and imagined events in *The Unfortunates*.

Despite being presumably internal, the words apparently spoken to Hailey by nearby flora in this extract are represented the same way as dialogue shared with other characters, making it difficult to establish whether Hailey literally has this communicative relationship, or indeed if other passages of dialogue throughout the text may be

<sup>54</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 34(S)

<sup>55</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 34(H)

interpreted as internal. Naturally, the same dilemma applies to Sam's narration, his dialogue with creatures and insects similarly indistinguishable from that with other people. Indeed, in a further act of mirroring, both narrators hear the same three words spoken ("Mercy", Charity", and "Humility"), but they are also contrasted by the reversed order in which they occur. Such doubt in the internal or external nature of dialogue is reinforced in the ways Sam and Hailey refer to other characters, for example the lone shift manager of the shop at which Hailey and Sam find employment. Sam names this man 'Viamomonacci', 'Viapaponacci', 'Viapiponacci' and 'Viapoponacci' over a brief descriptive passage, and in her corresponding narration Hailey calls him 'Viamimopolis', 'Viamemopolis', 'Vialolopolis' and 'Vialilopolis'. Indeed this patterned reconfiguration of vowels and consonants is applied every time certain non-primary characters are mentioned throughout the text, entirely removing the objectivity of putative narrative and leaving only the narrators' internal, impressionistic and interpretive identifications of these characters. Hailey and Sam continue to act as a pair of unreliable narrators, their increasingly erratic, contrary and fantastical narrative voices enacting another Sarrautian suspicion of narrative objectivity.

To term the narration of *Only Revolutions* as a narrative compound rather than two separate narrators seems appropriate, as Bray's essay goes on to state: "The full meaning of each passage cannot be understood without a reading of the other; the two, like Sam and Hailey (at this point at least) should not and cannot be separated from each other".<sup>56</sup> The common adoption of rhyme, onomatopoeia and compound words strengthen this connection, with repeated shared utterances such as "Boooooooooomblastandruin" becoming mutual catchphrases of sorts. Despite the structural rigidity and habitual similarities in written style for both narrating voices, it continues to produce a *dual* perspective. Aside from specific examples of repetition in each narrator's language, their individual interpretations of events, opinions, self-identity, and observations of each other are consistently synonymous, but almost never identical, and therefore necessarily idiosyncratic and irreconcilably separate. In the following extracts, descriptions of Sam's driving lead each of them to briefly muse upon the apparent freedom and strength with which they attribute themselves:

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<sup>56</sup> Joe Bray, 'Only Revolutions and the Drug of Rereading', p. 205 In: Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (eds.), *Mark Z. Danielewski*, pp. 200-15 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012)

Thrills then at the Wheel,  
whirring for Cinch City, allways  
grinding the turns.  
Ahead, a bash with oodles  
of fun. By a blurrun past  
Porters, Munitionhaulers  
and Trams.  
I'm the most of the moment.  
Every moment. Seed for the quick,  
the slickest of Ricks.  
While Hailey's a waddydoo pail,  
free maybe but frail.

57

Sam then's fugazi at the Wheel,  
tarring for Edge City, allways  
scarfing the turns.  
Keyed up anyway for  
divagating leagues, blurring  
Potawatomies, Stumblebums  
and Banshees.  
But I'm the only range by a stranger  
ferocity. One I cannot meet but  
must seek. Until it defeats me.  
While Sam's the freak,  
free maybe but weak.

58

These sections indicate more of the narrative style the two narrators share; the extra 'r' in the words "blurrun" and "blurring" seems to emphasise haste and disorientation, whilst the extra 'l' in 'allways' deepens its meaning to include not just consistency and time, but directionality ("all ways"). There remain, however, major differences in the way they engage with identity and self-definition. Sam describes himself as "the most of the moment. Every moment. Seed for the quick, the slickest of Ricks". Hailey, on the other hand, defines herself in very different terms, her equivalent passage reading "I'm the only range by a stranger ferocity. One I cannot meet but must seek. Until it defeats me". Their views of each other also bear more subtle indications of their necessary separation, the mirroring of "free maybe but frail" with "free maybe but weak" offering another near-synonymous expression which betrays a jarring division; each sees themselves to be stronger than the other. The differences in their perceptions of time, communication and self-identity ensure that typically objective narrative events or characteristics are made questionable and unreliable by an opposing but equally valid counterpoint. Narrative events throughout *Only Revolutions*, despite the simultaneity and stylistic similarities, are at all times presented as a duality, and the conventional expectations of linearity must be considered secondary to Danielewski's creation of a form that suits this narrative duality.

It is particularly telling that, although during these early stages they are inexorably drawn towards one another, the eventual union between Sam and Hailey – and the one

<sup>57</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 71(S)

<sup>58</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 71(H)

point at which their narration is in fact identical, naturally occurring at the point at which the two narratives cross over at the centre of the book – is troubled by the rumblings of an oncoming storm. On pages 180-181, in both sets of page numeration, Sam and Hailey’s narrations finally meet in the middle of the book. For the first time their respective narrations are visible alongside one another, and are identical word-for-word:

Leaving US together with  
our Leftwrist Twists of Gold.  
Our sticky fingers, our lips.  
With just 5½ Jars of HONEY left.  
Our liquiditty. Sweetest mix of all we sip.  
—Here’s to deciding.  
—So glad.  
—Already welling up.  
—Laughter won’t ever stop me.  
—I can’t help bleeding.  
—Everyone dreams the Dream  
*but we are it.*

59

Leaving US together with  
our Leftwrist Twists of Gold.  
Our sticky fingers, our lips.  
With just 5½ Jars of HONEY left.  
Our liquiditty. Sweetest mix of all we sip.  
—Here’s to deciding.  
—So glad.  
—Already welling up.  
—Laughter won’t ever stop me.  
—I can’t help bleeding.  
—Everyone dreams the Dream  
*but we are it.*

60

The interior monologues of these extracts continue to repeat several motifs precisely – but for the first time, both narrators wear the same “Leftwrist Twist of Gold”, and have an equal “5 ½ Jars of HONEY left”. They continue to exhibit their shared linguistic and stylistic quirks, such as the capitalisation of the word “US” to reinforce both shared subjectivity and their grandiose setting of the American landscape, as well as the peculiar misspelling “liquiditty” which evokes not just the meaning of “liquidity” but also a “liquid ditty” – a neat summation of the fluid nature of their narrative. The italicised dialogue is likewise identical, suggesting that these words are spoken aloud, together, by both Hailey and Sam. Their coloured ‘o’s appear mixed together for the first time, Hailey’s narration now including Sam’s green ‘o’s, and Sam’s containing Hailey’s gold. Even here, however, the contradiction inherent in Danielewski’s compound dual-narrative is reinforced by his choice of form. The book must be rotated in order to read both sections fully, meaning they are read not simultaneously, but *alternately*. Differences between them also remain in the typographic and visual elements of the page, most noticeably being the mixing of coloured ‘o’s. The words “of HONEY” in the above extracts are led with a green ‘o’ in “of” and a gold ‘o’ in “HONEY” during Sam’s narration but are reversed in Hailey’s,

<sup>59</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 180(H)

<sup>60</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. 180(S)

demonstrating that as both alternate between green and gold, every 'o' throughout each narration is in fact different to that in its counterpart. Both narrations employ identical formal devices, but produce direct opposition rather than replication. From this point Sam and Hailey are pulled apart, formally represented in the fact that the two narratives now pass by each other and travel physically outwards from the centre of the book. The repetition taking place on their respective 180<sup>th</sup> pages is as close as they ever come to a truly compound act of narration, and even here subtle visual differences between Hailey and Sam's texts reinforce the inevitable: they are destined to part.

The alternating linguistic pattern of *Only Revolutions* takes particular advantage of the book itself; the act of reading one narrator's account and then re-reading from the perspective of the second defies the traditional linear structure of page-turning, instead creating numerous cliff-hangers and call-backs which would be lost in a purely sequential reading. Both the narration and physical structures of *Only Revolutions* present events experienced simultaneously by two narrators, drawn together by their linguistic and stylistic similarities as much as the physical, formal devices of alternation and rotation by which they are entwined. Where established criticism such as that from McHale or Berry has identified Danielewski's formal and linguistic devices as experimental in nature, The New Fiction provides terminology and a model for textual analysis which avoids this definition. Rather than creating associations through a loosely-defined term equally implying incompleteness and obscurity as it does originality and innovation, it focuses on the realisation of stated creative and methodological goals. Considering Danielewski's assertions about the renewed potential of paper and print, and the invited connections between Danielewski's writing and the "total media environment" in which it participates, The New Fiction's interpretation of unorthodox literary devices as functional and deliberately non-experimental continues to hold critical relevance and ideological similarities. Danielewski's text is viewed not as an experiment with form, but as a carefully designed resolution to the specific problem of multiplicity in narration and the combination of internal monologues. Additionally, by avoiding the language of experimentation, The New Fiction contributes to a historical critical context closely-aligned to the author's expressed intentions, specifically in Danielewski's case to the interrogation of the form of the print novel in a widely-varied media environment. Where Johnson and Gordon argue for focus on the creative possibilities uniquely afforded by print fiction,



Danielewski creates a text which utilises pagination, graphic design, typographic layout and physical manipulation as metaphorical and narrative devices, clearly enacting his stated desire to explore the book itself as a contemporary medium. Most significantly of all, the application of New Fiction criticism is coupled with a body of works which continue to represent the creative output informed by this critical thought in the twenty-first century, inviting comparison with the new authors – such as Danielewski – alongside whom they are now published.

#### 6.4 Summary

One of the central arguments in Johnson's and Gordon's outline for *The New Fiction*, that the novel may utilise its own technology to emphasise its unique narrative properties, has demonstrable critical application in the twenty-first century. In Danielewski's writing, formal innovation serves specific arguments about the combination of narrative and physical form in paper and print. The problematisation of framing narration in *House of Leaves* is an example of such, achieved both narratively in the character of Johnny Truant and formally in Danielewski's treatment of narrative voice itself and application of unorthodox formal constraints. Similarly the comparisons and contrasts between *Only Revolutions'* narrators Sam and Hailey are established not just as an aspect of narrative but in the written form, linguistic style and aesthetic characteristics, and the way in which the book must be physically manipulated. Although by no means constituting direct reference, one can identify the echoes of the marriage between style and structure that made Johnson, Quin, and their contemporaries so 'inaccessible'. The wide, mainstream appeal of Danielewski's writing befits the technological climate of its time; where Quin or Johnson's innovative approaches to the novel may have been viewed as difficult in the 1960s and '70s, there is a broader community of internationalised, media-literate readers available to Danielewski in the twenty-first century. The effect of this appears to be twofold: firstly, visual and narrative devices such as those deployed by Quin and Johnson are expanded, accounting for the larger range of media available with which textual style can interact, reference and remediate. Secondly, the potentially extreme reconfigurations of the print novel which Danielewski develops suffer less from a perception as 'difficult' texts, with an existing critical readership ready and capable to negotiate between a range of forms and media in a way denied to Johnson or Quin.

It is not only the mere existence of Danielewski's novels in the twenty-first century which reinforces the continuation of The New Fiction's ideologies, but also the widespread critical and commercial successes Danielewski has experienced by contrast to his British predecessors. Works which might previously have been dismissed as difficult and opaque, or subjected to the critical oversight of an experimental label, now hold demonstrable appeal and a significant place in the critical discussion of the modern novel. Whilst Danielewski's place amongst such discussions is clear, used regularly as an example of print literature's challenge to the digital revolution, the critical and methodological associations made in this chapter between he and The New Fiction suggest that Johnson, Quin and their contemporaries also warrant consideration, for both their historical critical context and their currently-published creative works. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the application of The New Fiction's critical position and comparison of their creative works is not isolated to Danielewski's fiction.



## Chapter 7: Jonathan Safran Foer and The New Fiction

### 7.1 Introduction

Achieving a substantial degree of mainstream commercial success, critical attention to Foer's writing is prevalent, making Foer the most widely-attended writer examined in this thesis. However, his statements of intent in the writing of fiction are notably fewer. It is therefore necessary to begin this chapter by characterising the body of criticism concerning Foer, and indicating the areas in which The New Fiction lens facilitates a critical reading. A substantial portion of published criticism of Foer's writing concerns his evocation of traumatic cultural histories, including the Holocaust and 9/11. Mitchum Huehls draws specific attention to the treatment of trauma and consciousness in Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), alongside Art Spiegelman's 2004 novel *In The Shadow of No Towers*.<sup>1</sup> Alfred Hornung makes similar comparison between *Extremely Loud* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), examining themes of transnationalism and memory,<sup>2</sup> as indeed does Lewis S. Gleich, reading Foer and DeLillo alongside Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) in terms of the ethics of fiction and the mass-media spectacle.<sup>3</sup> Other critical works focus on the specific presence of traumatic events within Foer's novels: Elizabeth Kovach uses *Extremely Loud* to demonstrate the effect of "cataclysmic events" in the understanding of genre.<sup>4</sup> Audrey Bardizbanian focuses on Foer's evocation of traumatic memory.<sup>5</sup> Second-degree memory and the Holocaust are also examined by Menachem Feuer,<sup>6</sup> and Francisco

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchum Huehls, 'Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11's Timely Traumas' In: Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, *Literature After 9/11*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008) pp. 42-59

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Hornung, 'Terrorist Violence and Transnational Memory: Jonathan Safran Foer and Don DeLillo' In: Udo J. Hebel (ed.), *Transnational American Memories*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009) pp. 171-83

<sup>3</sup> Lewis S. Gleich, 'Ethics in the Wake of the Image: The Post-9/11 Fiction of DeLillo, Auster, and Foer' In: *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 37, No. 3, 2014 pp. 161-76

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Kovach, 'Cataclysmic Events as Genre Shapers? A Case Study of the Fantastic in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*' In: Michael Basseler, Ansgar Nunning, Christine Schwaneke (eds.), *The Cultural Dynamics of Generic Change in Contemporary Fiction: Theoretical Frameworks, Genres and Model Interpretations*, (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013) pp. 301-13

<sup>5</sup> Audrey Bardizbanian, 'Writing Post-Traumatic Memories, Writing the City: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*' In: Dana Mihailescu, Roxana Oltean, Mihaela Precup (eds.), *Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014) pp. 300-19

<sup>6</sup> Menachem Feuer, 'Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*' In: *Schofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* Vol. 25, No. 2, 2007 pp. 24-48

Collado-Rodriguez,<sup>7</sup> in relation to Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002). The formal properties of Foer's writing are well-represented in this body of work, particularly in terms of the evocation of memory and trauma. Focused critical examination of the specific formal and textual devices that Foer employs is nevertheless comparatively sparse for his first two novels. Crucially, as seen with Danielewski in Chapter Six of this thesis, an approach to Foer's writing based on arguments presented by The New Fiction would necessarily identify the specific narrative goals which prompt the adoption of unorthodox literary form, once again demonstrating its ongoing value as an applicable framework for reading.

A key principle of the critical lens supplied by The New Fiction is to avoid a generalised view of a work's unorthodoxy, and more upon the specific goals underpinning an author's formal and linguistic devices, with a view to examining the degree to which those goals might be considered successfully met. Readings of *Extremely Loud* by Alison Gibbons and by S. Todd Atchison, though retaining the post-9/11 context, provide more direct examination of Foer's devices, and his positioning amongst writers of formally innovative contemporary novels. Formal and linguistic readings of Foer are more commonly reserved for his third novel, *Tree of Codes* (2010), which exhibits a treatment of the book form that challenges the very process of reading by way of an aggressive re-imagining of the page surface. Berit Michel, James Randall, N. Katherine Hayles, Kiene Brillenberg Wurth, Matt Rager, and Paul Ardoyn each read *Tree of Codes*, based on the contemporary technological climate in which it is situated. These readings demonstrate the consideration of form, of medium, and the degree to which metaphor is sustained with written narrative that The New Fiction lacked during its own time of writing.

## **7.2 *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005)**

Thematically, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* shares much in common with The New Fiction writers introduced in this thesis. Foer's novel primarily follows Oskar Schell, a relentlessly inquisitive and precocious nine-year-old boy from New York whose father Thomas was killed during the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. Always enthralled by his father's puzzles, Oskar trawls the city for months to solve Thomas' last great mystery,

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<sup>7</sup> Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, 'Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*' In: *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 32 No. 1, 2008 pp. 54-68

and find the owner of a mysterious key left amongst his father's possessions. Through his adventure, Oskar commemorates his father and attempts to rationalise his loss – but his unusual enactments of grief place stress on his relationship with his mother. Alongside Oskar's narrative are the letters of his presumed-dead grandfather, Thomas Sr., a man muted by grief after his traumatic experiences of the Dresden bombings in World War Two, and the death of his wife. Thomas Sr.'s letters tell the story of his difficult second marriage, to Oskar's grandmother. The incomplete triangle which characterises the families and lovers of Quin's novels is present in *Extremely Loud*; a child and a mother are in mourning for a missing father, a child and grandmother are learning and sharing stories about a missing grandfather, and a troubled couple live in the shadow of a deceased woman, ex-wife to one, and sister to the other. Oskar also has an ongoing relationship with his father's memory, recreating his presence through previously-shared activities and vividly remembered conversations. This facet of the novel bears parallels to Quin's protagonists in both *Passages* and *Three*, who read, perform, and enact rituals to recreate the presence of a missing third. The various treatments of isolation, memory, and grief which Foer makes in *Extremely Loud* are also reminiscent of Johnson's writing, particularly in *The Unfortunates*. Johnson's unnamed protagonist commemorates his deceased friend Tony, recalling their shared experiences alongside the procedural activities of a journalist as he moves around the city of Nottingham. Foer, too, presents through Oskar a narration which recreates his city – New York – whilst evoking the memory of Oskar's father. The tying-together of place and memory in both novels opens several avenues for comparison.

As noted in Chapter Three, Johnson's *Albert Angelo* employs a wide range of formal devices. Each section of Johnson's second novel displays specific formal conceits designed to embody the cognitive and communicative efforts of its titular protagonist, and the 'truth' of the world they occupy. Quin also allows the various themes and foci of her novels to dictate their form, most notably in her presentation of strained, triangular relationships. Foer's second novel is similarly moulded around particular models of communication and mimesis. Each chapter of *Extremely Loud* uses form to enact and reinforce aspects of each character's interpersonal relationships, and to truthfully recreate their experiences. Additionally, as noted in Chapter Four, Quin makes regular deconstructions of language, and modifies punctuation and paragraphing to suit the repetition, contradiction, and fixation which befit

her characters' mental states. In *Extremely Loud*, Foer similarly adjusts his use of monologue and dialogue, with linguistic devices attuned to the various struggles to communicate which his characters endure. Beyond the thematic similarities, there is metaphor at work in Foer's novel in both its physical properties and its technical construction of language, which suggests that The New Fiction's lens may again be productively applied.

S. Todd Atchison describes *Extremely Loud* in terms of various "artifact[s] for remembrance"<sup>8</sup> which are created for Foer's reader, and clarifies this term to mean "memories that become materialized, retold in images, words, and voice".<sup>9</sup> It is in reading such "artifacts" that The New Fiction perspective provides its first valuable contribution for reading of Foer's work. *Extremely Loud* has many visual recreations of objects and images taken from the narrative world which Oskar occupies. The first is simple; Oskar receives the business card of Gerald Thompson, the limousine driver, and rather than simply being described, it is typographically recreated for the reader on the page.<sup>10</sup> The device is notably similar to Johnson's recreation of the fortune-teller's card in *Albert Angelo*,<sup>11</sup> and comments from both authors reveal parallels in the intent with which the device is used. As noted in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis, Johnson asserts that such devices are designed to reinforce the truth of his writing, whilst sustaining dialogue with other media. Gordon strongly promotes a contemporary writing which aspires to engage a contemporary media climate whilst sustaining this truth. In an interview with Dave Weich, Foer's words reveal a clear correlation with The New Fiction's perspective on print media within a broader technological context, and formal innovation as a means to engage with that context:

It's not a coincidence that words so often show up in painting. It's not a coincidence that in music there's so much sampling and borrowing. For whatever reason, writers don't show the influence of other forms of media all that much. They show it less than any other form right now. In part, that's good. It protects storytelling. It protects the book as something that is different from a web site or a pop song. On the other hand, it starts to diverge from how most people I know experience the world, which is as a collage of different kinds of

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<sup>8</sup> S. Todd Atchison, "'Why I am Writing from Where You are Not'", *Absence and Presence in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close** p. 361 In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* Vol. 46, No. 4, 2006 pp. 359-69

<sup>9</sup> S. Todd Atchison, *op. cit.* p. 367

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 4

<sup>11</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Picador, 2013) pp. 120-1

media, a jumble of sights and sounds and bits of information, in a way that wasn't true even five years ago or ten years ago.<sup>12</sup>

Foer's justification for his unusual visual devices is akin to those offered by The New Fiction: borrowing from other media, and engaging in dialogue with newer technologies, to create a truthful impression of a contemporary climate. Indeed, like Johnson and Gordon, Foer levels criticism at writers who fail to recognise the conversation taking place between print and other media, and who subsequently fail to develop literary forms which participate in that dialogue. Perhaps most significantly, Foer suggests that while the conservatism which would separate print from its digital counterparts holds certain value, it creates an unwelcome distance between literature and human experience. Thus, the experiential truth sought by Johnson and his contemporaries appears to be the same truth sought by Foer.

The inclusion of individual devices such as a business card is one straightforward example of how this is achieved. Further examples from *Extremely Loud* demonstrate the extent to which Foer recreates, to use Atchison's term, his characters' experience of remembrance through the provision of artefacts. Evident before the textual narrative of *Extremely Loud* even begins is Foer's inclusion of photographs. As Gibbons indicates, the purpose of these images is initially unclear, but by following Oskar's lead as principal narrator, they become increasingly relevant:

It is only with retrospective narrative knowledge that the reader is able to connect the images to the themes to which they relate; the search for the lock into which the key fits, birds, and attempts at communication.<sup>13</sup>

The image of the lock holds particular metaphorical significance for *Extremely Loud*, and serves as another example of Foer utilising artefacts to evoke a Johnsonian truthfulness. The lock holds clear pertinence to Oskar's ongoing mission, representing a goal and a powerful motivation for Foer's young protagonist. Additionally, the lock represents access, and invokes the participatory nature of Foer's devices; the turning of the page mimics the opening of a door, implying the act of reading to constitute a process of revelation similar to that which Oskar himself experiences. The image is repeated several times throughout the

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, in Dave Weich, 'Unlocking Jonathan Safran Foer', *Powells.com* (2006) (no pagination) <http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/unlocking-jonathan-safran-foer-by-dave/> [accessed 24/07/2015]

<sup>13</sup> Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* p. 135 (London: Routledge, 2012)

novel, with the progressive turning of the key in the lock in each image bringing Oskar – and the reader – closer to resolution and revelation about Thomas' key. Other photographs serve similar purposes, acting as both illustration and metaphor. Blurred images of windows reflect the way in which Oskar and his grandmother communicate across the street, visual artefacts representing both the literal process of their conversation and the often faltering and imprecise communication they share. Frequent images of doors, locks, and keys reinforce the image of the key and the access gained – for Oskar through his pursuit of a mystery, and for the reader in following Oskar's lead through the narrative. Foer's use of photographs, as Gibbons states, does "not have a merely illustrative function in the novel",<sup>14</sup> but provides instead visual artefacts which recreate many of Oskar's experiences of seeing and doing. Foer's photographs employ the materiality of the printed image to establish empathy beyond that created by the written text; the reader sees and gradually interprets the symbolism of these images along with Oskar.

Oskar's only clue as to the key's owner is the word 'Black', written in red pen on the envelope in which he found it. In conversation with a stationery shop clerk, Oskar makes a series of revelations about how this would come to be written:

"It's not easy to do what your dad did, writing the name of one color with another color. It doesn't come naturally". "Really?" "This is even harder", she said, and she wrote something on the next piece of paper and told me to read it out loud. She was right, it didn't feel natural at all, because part of me wanted to say the name of the color, and part of me wanted to say what was written [...] "when someone tests a pen, usually he either writes the name of the color he's writing with, or his name. So the fact that 'Black' is written in red makes me think that Black is someone's name". "Or *her* name". "And I'll tell you something else". "Yeah?" "The *b* is capitalized. You wouldn't usually capitalize the first letter of a color".<sup>15</sup>

The passage of dialogue between Oskar and the clerk continues to reinforce the endless curiosity which Oskar exhibits; having identified her as "probably an expert of colour",<sup>16</sup> Oskar follows her words intently. This passage also, however, acts as a primer for the artefacts which follow over the succeeding pages; visual reproductions of several pages of test-paper for the shop's pens. Having been prepared to look for juxtapositions of

<sup>14</sup> Alison Gibbons, *op. cit.* p. 128

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* p. 46

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

conflicting colour and text, and erroneous capitalisation, the reader participates with Oskar in a word-search which turns up a vital clue: his father's name, written in red ink on the third page.<sup>17</sup> By investigating the mysterious key, Oskar continues an activity he shared with his father: the hunting of clues sustaining Thomas' presence. In this example, the reader joins Oskar's word search and, upon its success, becomes participant in a truthful enactment of Oskar's remembrance.

Reading Foer's devices in this manner opens a number of direct comparisons with The New Fiction writers, as it did for Danielewski's writing in Chapter Six of this thesis. Foer's recreation of memory through the formal mimesis of memorial acts holds striking similarity to devices used in Quin's *Three*. Distraught by the loss of S., Ruth and Leonard sustain her presence by reading her journals, and listening to her recordings. S. is missing from their lives, but holds a tangible narrative presence throughout the novel, and a pivotal role in the increasingly taught relationship between her former hosts. Quin chooses a form which renders S.'s artefacts formally for the reader; the acts of reading and listening are recreated through a combination of remediation and an application of epistolary forms. The reader becomes participant in the memorial rituals which Leonard and Ruth perform. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* achieves a similar memorial for Tony, by engaging the reader in a re-enactment of remembrance, establishing empathy with the random interjection of imagery which characterises the experience Johnson aims to recreate. In *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, Johnson invites the reader to witness Christie's fastidious book-keeping by providing facsimiles of these books, detailing the manner in which he weighs the cost of offence against the recompense of revenge. The final pages of Foer's novel provide confirmation of these comparisons. They feature screenshots from the Lyle Owerko film 'The Falling Man', which demonstrates close attention to the physicality of the printed book and acts as a Johnsonian tangible metaphor. Using the pages of the book to create a flip-book animation in which the titular man is lifted upwards, Foer creates a visual representation of the manner in which a physical artefact – a photograph, a book, or any number of the artefacts Oskar encounters – achieves memorial, and a sustained presence for the lost. The efficacy with which such formal comparisons can be made continues to reinforce the argument that Quin and Johnson hold an ongoing relevance to examining and

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *op. cit.* p. 49

contextualising certain models used in innovative and commercially successful writing. In addition, the comparison carries with it the weight of critical argument about the novel made by writers like Johnson and Gordon, and their contemporaries. Not only is Johnson's and Gordon's desired New Fiction achieved by Foer, it is sustained by the comparison as a valid critical and creative presence in the twenty-first century.

Whilst Foer's visual devices and artefacts provide individual points of comparison, a more comprehensive characteristic of *Extremely Loud* as a whole is the treatment of language. Both dialogue and monologue appear in a modified form which reflects more fully the various struggles and lapses of communication which Foer's characters experience. In the opening paragraph of the novel, Oskar's interior monologue sees him conducting playful thought experiments with his surroundings:

What about a teakettle? What if the spout opened and closed when the steam came out, so it would become a mouth, and it could whistle pretty melodies, or do Shakespeare, or just crack up with me? I could invent a teakettle that reads in Dad's voice, so I could fall asleep, or maybe a set of kettles that sings the chorus of "Yellow Submarine", which is a song by the Beatles, who I love, because entomology is one of my *raisons d'être*, which is a French expression that I know.<sup>18</sup>

Oskar takes an often superfluously explanatory tone, providing extraneous information, and his narration moves quickly, with short statements and exaggerated use of commas creating unusually long and fast-paced sentences. This passage demonstrates much of Oskar's intellectual curiosity whilst retaining the simplistic and unrefined communicative patterns of a young boy, as Gibbons describes: "Foer's extensive use of simple connectives and conjunctions instils a lack of grammatical sophistication [...] and consequently works to signal to readers that the focalising character is a child".<sup>19</sup> Accuracy of communication is clearly important to Oskar, and this characterises much of his narration, revealing a constant desire to be properly understood without ambiguity or subtext. His explanation of '*raisons d'être*' as "a French expression that I know" is superfluous, but demonstrates the extent to which Oskar aims for clarity. However, this passage also reveals the extent to which Oskar's mental games, puzzles, and indeed thoroughness of detail serve to distract from his

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* p. 1

<sup>19</sup> Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* p. 137



experience of grief. The surrealism of the singing teakettle is brought sharply into focus by “a teakettle that reads in Dad’s voice, so I could fall asleep”. By contrast to the “pretty melodies” and cracking up which would entertain Oskar, this line reveals two crucial undercurrents obscured by the comic tone; he misses his father, and he cannot sleep. Thus Gibbons continues, “these narratives disguise Oskar’s grief and loneliness in their surreal humour”.<sup>20</sup>

Though not as clearly unreliable a narrator as Danielewski’s Johnny Truant, there are certain parallels in the way both narrators spin elaborate tales to disguise or suppress more private thoughts. For Johnny, the onset of paranoia is evident as his relationship with Zampano’s labyrinthine text becomes increasingly uncomfortable. As noted in Chapter Six of this thesis, Johnny wilfully acknowledges himself as a liar who has at times modified the text to suit his own authorial goals. For Oskar, it is the imagination of fantastical and surreal scenarios, and the compulsive attention to communicative detail which conceals his feelings of grief. The New Fiction once again provides some applicable precedents and terminologies which lend context to the reading of this unusual narrative model, not least in identifying Johnny and Oskar as narrators who tell stories, and therefore tell lies. Much of Quin’s writing occupies the grey territory between what is said and what is thought or felt; the cacophonous mixture of narrative perspectives presented throughout *Passages* often conceals uncomfortable truths about Quin’s protagonists in a shroud of oblique dreams and fantasies. Throughout *Berg*, Alastair constructs imagined scenarios which entirely distract from his inactivity and anxiety, which continually prevents him from realising his intent. This latter comparison with Quin brings with it the broader New Fiction understanding of her writing. If Quin’s writing can be read as a careful attempt to reflect the processes of an unstable and insecure mind, by the same logic Foer deliberately creates a narrative impression of the experience of grief and its impact on one’s communicative faculties in *Extremely Loud*. Foer’s justification of his title, in an interview with *The New York Times*, appears to confirm the relevance of this reading, drawing specific attention to the manner in which communicative relationships throughout his novel are presented as flawed:

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Every relationship in the book is built around silence and distance. Extremely loud and incredibly close is what no two people are to one another.<sup>21</sup>

Foer acknowledges the irony created by his title, and in doing so provides evidence that the reading facilitated by comparison to New Fiction authors is valid. Foer's modifications to monologue and dialogue are driven by a need to represent emotional distance, achieving with linguistic structure and form that which cannot be written without contradicting this need. A Johnsonian 'writing problem' is thereby solved, a physical metaphor established to resolve an apparent narrative paradox.

The way in which a mind remembers is demonstrably at the heart of formal decisions made by Foer, Johnson, and Quin. Through the provision of artefacts, Foer recreates an impression of Oskar's experiences for the reader, sustaining his father's presence through the various ritual acts which make up his quest. Through the use of language and written form, Foer recreates the rapid and precocious curiosity of Oskar's mind, and places it in conflict with his feelings of grief which drive his memorial rituals. The association can, as for Danielewski in Chapter Six, be expanded, using The New Fiction's strategies to consider the precise effects of the devices used. Not only does Johnson seek to create a kind of novelistic truth, he aims to do so with the specific intention to challenge and criticise a literary mainstream which he perceives as ill-equipped and ignorant of the means necessary to achieve this. The New Fiction recognised Quin as a writer with similar goals, who sought to recreate the intangible subjectivity of experience through something so paradoxically tangible as novelistic form. Foer's interviews reveal that he, too, aims to present a reader as directly as possible with an experience recognisable within a contemporary technological climate, through the medium of writing. The crucial addition to the act of cultural mimesis, for which Johnson provides valuable precedent and critical terminology, is the creation of a conceptual truth, through the form of the novel, rather than the illusions of purely narrative fiction. To again borrow from Robert Nye, if *Doubtfire* is not *about* schizophrenia, but rather *is* schizophrenia, Foer's writing in *Extremely Loud* is not *about* grief, memorial, and

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, in Deborah Solomon, 'The Rescue Artist' (no pagination) In: *The New York Times*, 27/02/2005 [[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/magazine/the-rescue-artist.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/magazine/the-rescue-artist.html?_r=0)][accessed 14<sup>th</sup> August 2015]

miscommunication so much as it *is* those things, rendered formally, metaphorically, and textually.

### 7.3 *Tree of Codes* (2010)

*Extremely Loud* exemplifies the employment of multiple devices, specifically tailored to match the development of individual narrative circumstances, which also characterises Johnson's *Albert Angelo*. *Tree of Codes* is the Foer novel which demonstrates the singular and comprehensive treatment of the entire novel form shown by texts like *The Unfortunates* or Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*. As noted in Chapter 5 of this thesis, *Tree of Codes* was written through a process of erasure, removing all but a few select words from each page of Bruno Schulz' 1934 short story collection *Street of Crocodiles* to create a new narrative of Foer's own devising. Both the title and the resulting retail copy of *Tree of Codes* exaggerates this erasure further, each page delicately die-cut so that Foer's selected words hang precariously in the physical space left following the omission of Schultz'. The publisher Visual Editions includes, alongside other promotional material for Foer's book, a quotation from artist Olafur Eliasson describing *Tree of Codes* as "a book that remembers it has a body".<sup>22</sup> Supporting Eliasson's words are a series of short promotional videos<sup>23</sup> demonstrating the construction process of Foer's book, the tangibility of the book's connection to its body made clear by the careful design work and intricate machinery required to print and die-cut the text, and bind its fragile pages. In the resultant book, it is indeed impossible to overlook the physicality of the object itself, immediately posing a practical challenge of how to read its words and even turn its pages. Berit Michel recognises as much, stating that "Foer's die-cut experiment challenges the reader's ability to construe meaning".<sup>24</sup> Michel also proposes that a solution to this conundrum is one of readerly intent, stating that "our question should correctly be what function Foer's particular technical variation of print narrative has".<sup>25</sup> Michel's comment resembles Johnson's call for focus on "whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve",

<sup>22</sup> Visual Editions, 'Our Books – VE2: *Tree of Codes* (no pagination) [<http://www.visual-editions.com/our-books/tree-of-codes>][accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2015]

<sup>23</sup> Visual Editions, 'Our Books – VE2: *Tree of Codes* (no pagination)

<sup>24</sup> Berit Michel, "'PlastiCity': Foer's *Tree of Codes* as (Visual) Multilayered Urban Topography – Performing Space and time in a Twenty-First-Century Adaptation of Bruno Schultz's Textual Labyrinths' p. 166 In: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 55, No. 2, 2014 pp. 166-86

<sup>25</sup> Berit Michel, *op. cit.* p. 167

“a literary rationale and a technical justification”.<sup>26</sup> Hayles also provides a reading closely-aligned to the broad New Fiction project, arguing that Foer’s writing is exemplary of a select group of works which “entice readers to become intimate with the novels’ bodies through physical manipulation of their printed forms”.<sup>27</sup> Following Pressman’s coining of an ‘aesthetic of bookishness’, Hayles argues:

Foer’s text and dozens like it initiate complex coordination between bodily responses evoked by scenes of representation and physical actions required to read the text. In Foer’s case these actions include turning and holding the pages without tearing them and moving the eyes as hole [sic] words (or word fragments) are skipped or are read in relation to the words on the page. [...] Texts that employ their bodies to create narrative complexity must be read not for their words alone but also for the physical involvements readers undertake to access their materialities.<sup>28</sup>

To overcome the challenges posed by Foer’s selection of form, both Hayles and Michel reach the same conclusion as Johnson about the hostile critical reception of his own innovations. A focus on materiality and form, the specific functions served by the manner in which an author uses the body of the book in conjunction with its narrative content, is essential.

Michel’s comments on the challenges made by *Tree of Codes* to the construance of meaning are evidenced readily by the opening few pages of Foer’s book. It is unclear whether one is to read only the words printed on each delicate, fragmentary page, or to read the entire visual amalgam of words and spaces, obscured or made visible by each turn. The result signifies what Hayles recognises to be the major achievement of Foer’s selection of form: a narrative complexity not present in the source text from which Foer’s was created.<sup>29</sup> The words printed on the immediate surface of page 8, unaffected by the physical modification to the page, would read as follows:

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<sup>26</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing your Memoirs?*

<sup>27</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness’ p. 227

In: *PMLA* Vol. 128, No. 1, 2013 pp. 226-32

<sup>28</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness’ p. 231

<sup>29</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness’ p. 229

The passersby  
 had their eyes half-closed  
 .  
 .  
 wore  
 mask  
 children greeted each other with masks painted  
 on their faces  
 smiles.<sup>30</sup>

Everyone  
 his  
 .  
 ; they smiled at each other's

Reading only the words printed on the foremost page, Foer's selection of words indeed serves to create a legible narrative from the remnants of Schultz's. This extract bears standard English grammar and a sustained third-person narrative voice, with the only inconsistency being the lack of capitalisation on the sentence initial word "children". The language and tone of the passage resembles surrealism, as repeated images of faces, eyes, smiles, and masks create an unsettling scenario alongside suggestions of sleepwalking and dreaming. New Fiction comparisons emerge, particularly considering the manner in which Quin represents dream-states, imagination, and fantasy through devices of language and tone. The spacing of the page creates a large gap at the top of the page, and a wider spacing between individual words, condensing the text towards the bottom of the page. Quin, Johnson, and Danielewski also use blank space to imply a continuity of events prior to those physically printed in the novel: an appropriate narrative purpose, and a metaphor well-suited to a work produced through a process of omission. The result in *Tree of Codes* is an inconsistently-paced reading, with small handfuls of words clustered together; "The passersby" is for instance separated from "had their eyes half-closed" by an entire line and followed by the four words "everyone", "wore", "his", and "mask", each placed individually. Again, New Fiction writers offer precedents for such a device, Johnson controlling the pace of his narrators' thoughts through typographic layout throughout *The Unfortunates* and *House Mother Normal*, and Quin doing similarly throughout *Passages* and *Three* to disorient and detach from the notion of a singular putative narrative reality. Clearly, by reading in a manner encouraged by both contemporary critics such as Hayles and Michel, one can connect the unusual visual presentation of *Tree of Codes* to the various literary goals and methodologies encouraged by The New Fiction.

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2011) p. 8



hoarse Apart from them, from growing in this emptiness, windows and all, into back rising and fall mother and I wanting to”, again evocative of the dark imagery from the first reading, but with the complex mixture of narrative tone and punctuation familiar to readers of Quin. By engaging in the close reading of text and distant reading of form encouraged by Hayles, Foer’s text begins to resemble the marriage of form and text demanded by The New Fiction: Gordon’s ‘complete artefact’.

On the subject of experimentalism, *Tree of Codes* again appears to meet certain criteria demanded of New Fiction. Though the unusual typographic spacing was initially achieved by the process of erasure which Foer describes, it is immediately evident that the book held in the reader’s hand is not itself a copy of Bruno Schultz’s book with various words removed. Rather it is, as demonstrated by Visual Editions’ promotional video, a designed-for-purpose artefact. In Johnson’s terms, the erasure experiment conducted on Bruno Schultz’ *Street of Crocodiles* was completed, was successful, and thus provided Foer with a new way of producing a book previously unavailable. An apt comparison from Johnson’s own writing comes in the form of the single die-cut hole in the pages of *Albert Angelo*, which (as noted in Chapter Three of this thesis) Johnson describes in precisely such terms. Where Johnson used the device to create a physical act of foreshadowing, Foer expands it to create an expanse of jumbled narrative voices, through which imagery can be combined, realised, disconnected, or interrupted with the turn of each page. Once again Johnson’s writing provides context, and his criticism provides terminology, which allows the removal of Foer’s device from an experimental context, instead viewed as a functional and methodologically successful piece of novelistic practice.

Certainly Foer’s novel meets the ambition of challenging and reconfiguring the form of the book exemplified by writers like Johnson, Quin, or Danielewski, and the comparison invites the positioning of *Tree of Codes* within the contextual trajectory those writers occupy. There are however conflicts between The New Fiction’s position and the methodological development of *Tree of Codes*, primarily related to The New Fiction’s demand for specific novelistic intent. Further promotional commentary by Visual Editions illuminates some of the initial process behind the creation of Foer’s book:

Our early conversations with Jonathan Safran Foer about *Tree of Codes* began with Jonathan saying he was curious to explore and

experiment with the die-cut technique. With that as our mutual starting point, we spent many months of emails and phone calls, exploring the idea of the pages' physical relationship to one another and how this could somehow be developed to work with a meaningful narrative. This led to Jonathan deciding to use an existing piece of text and cut a new story out of it. Having considered working with various texts, Jonathan decided to cut into and out of what he calls his "favourite book": *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz.<sup>32</sup>

These comments reveal a major difference between the manner in which *Tree of Codes* is devised and constructed, and comparable works like Johnson's *The Unfortunates*. Rather than tailoring a form for the book specifically to embody and enhance a narrative in ways a traditional book form would not, Foer began with a notion of form and sought the creation of a narrative to employ it. This constitutes a reversal of the process which Johnson and Gordon attribute to their own – and their contemporaries' – writing. The New Fiction identifies challenging, solipsistic and experiential subject matter ill-suited to conventional writing, and then wilfully defies that convention by devising new novelistic forms and narrative models which resolve various mimetic and representational problems. Rather than experimentation, they would view this process as careful methodological development, resulting in novels which are new solutions to the problems of novel-writing, rather than experiments. The extension of this definition to *Tree of Codes* is complicated by the knowledge that it developed not as a narrative in search of a suitable form, but as a formal conceit in search of a narrative to occupy it. Despite the functional comparisons made possible throughout reading *Tree of Codes* in the context of The New Fiction, one cannot argue that Foer's novel constitutes a work of physical metaphor in the same vein as Johnson's. The process of its creation is not novelistic, according to the terms laid out by Johnson and Gordon. Crucially, however, the earlier comparisons made in this chapter remain valid; the contextual relationship established by similarities of form and narrative structuring allow for a comparative reading of *Tree of Codes* through The New Fiction lens, whilst simultaneously inviting a reading of contrast between their ideological and methodological bases. The New Fiction becomes, in this example, more actively engaged in the criticism of Foer's writing, providing not only points of convergence, but points of dissonance which warrant resolution.

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<sup>32</sup> Visual Editions, 'Our Books – VE2: *Tree of Codes* (no pagination)



Two arguments from Johnson's criticism in *Aren't You Rather Young* support the distinction between The New Fiction and *Tree of Codes*. Firstly, Johnson's call for novelistic truth is incompatible with Foer's procedure in this case; the form of *Tree of Codes* is not devised to enhance the truth of the narrative in ways unavailable to conventional representational fiction, because the narrative is not existent at the point of the form's conception. Secondly, the novel occupies the territory Johnson criticises when making his statement rejecting formalism. In Johnson's terms, his novels were falsely criticised for gimmickry because form was examined in isolation, rather than in combination with narrative as a construction of metaphor. To have engaged in such a process, devising form in isolation without being informed by the requirements of the narrative, might by Johnson's criteria open *Tree of Codes* to precisely those accusations The New Fiction sought to avoid. In the case of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, and of Foer's own *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, The New Fiction provides context and critical terminology which helps to free these innovative works from the careless application of the terms of experimentalism, and accusations of gimmickry. Rather, *Tree of Codes* is a work of form, for which the development of narrative proved necessary to ensure its status as a book. The result is that The New Fiction, though related to *Tree of Codes* by way of certain formal and stylistic similarities, is unable to identify it as successful on the terms which it provides. By virtue of not establishing and then resolving through form a narrative problem, *Tree of Codes* might be identified, in this specific context, to be experimental in nature.

Reading *Tree of Codes* in the context of The New Fiction introduces distinctions between Foer's practices and those Johnson and Gordon argued as necessary to the creation of new novels. Evidently, certain aspects of The New Fiction, though valuable, cannot be applied uncritically. In this case, The New Fiction is employed to establish a set of criteria which allow distinction between the highly visual, formally innovative novel, and the highly textual, narratively-engaged work of book-based visual art. As seen in the previous readings of Danielewski and Foer made in this thesis, The New Fiction provides a valuable, applicable, and contextualised reading of such works in its own right. This alone assures the ongoing vitality of the arguments made therein. The value of such a reading lies in the removal of such works from the context of experimentalism, and the relocation of those works into the broader critical timeline of the history of the novel, the engagement and

employment of other forms of media, and the ongoing role of printed media. However, The New Fiction becomes a more forceful tool for twenty-first century literary criticism when it is able to establish new distinctions and definitions pertinent to twenty-first century writing. The example of *Tree of Codes* demonstrates the boundaries of The New Fiction's criteria. Despite similarities between The New Fiction concerns and Foer's intent to create a book engaged with its own body and with the technological climate to which it belongs, the mismatch of Foer's methodological approach leaves two possibilities. *Tree of Codes* may be identified through The New Fiction lens as either a failed attempt at the desired new novel, an experimental and therefore non-novelistic work, or viewed in a comparative, collaborative role, native to the medium of visual art but employing devices and models borrowed from the novel. The latter implies a further demonstration of The New Fiction's value as a critical position on the contemporary novel: a potential for reflexivity beyond simply the texts which fall within its own boundaries. *Tree of Codes* serves as an example of a non-novelistic text which nevertheless borrows significantly from the novel, and is well-suited to demonstrate the extent to which The New Fiction may be placed in dialogue with works which do not satisfy its criteria.

#### **7.4 Summary**

The reading presented in this chapter demonstrates that The New Fiction continues to achieve its goal of establishing comparative relationships between print and other media. Johnson's intent for his writing is fundamentally novelistic, borrowing from other media in order to place his novels in dialogue with them, and comment on print's relationship to them. Foer's process is reversed; his intention with *Tree of Codes* appears to be to create an art object, which borrows from the novel in order to make commentary about novels. By facilitating such a reading, The New Fiction continues to supply applicable terminologies and definitions for the new novel to which it aspires, making distinction between primarily-novelistic works, and non-primary works which sustain similar arguments by referencing and borrowing from the novel. Creating such a dialogue between The New Fiction and a twenty-first century work which defies its parameters confirms that the retrospective view of The New Fiction need not necessarily be a static one. Though primarily a case study in terms of the creative works collected under its name, The New Fiction remains a dynamic and

adaptable critical perspective on the process and practice of writing novels. It continues to facilitate distinctions between much more recent texts, whilst providing historical context, and a valid challenge to the critical language still used to describe newer works which sit along the same trajectory.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

### 8.1 In Summary

Giles Gordon compiled *Beyond the Words* to celebrate the exciting future of British writing in the late twentieth century, a call-to-arms for a modern novel entirely alternative to the polite conservatism of the literary mainstream he observed. Yet, published two years following the death of B.S. Johnson and Ann Quin, Gordon's anthology-cum-manifesto is perhaps more elegiac than intended. Johnson's influence permeates *Beyond the Words*, Gordon applying and expanding the criteria and critical perspective borrowed from his original editorial partner. Quin is a quieter presence, yet one lauded by Gordon within that text and for many years subsequently in other writings as perhaps the clearest creator of the thrilling new writing his anthology encouraged. In the light of Alan Burns's emigration to America, Gordon's project to pay due attention to a much-overlooked group of young writers appeared already commemorative, retrospective from the outset. It is perhaps for this reason that the established view of Johnson as an isolated figure is so widely propagated; attempts to contextualise him amongst his peers, even when made by figures close to him, contemporaneous with the publication of Johnson's writing, necessarily operate as post-Johnson, post-New Fiction. The New Fiction nevertheless acts as firm evidence that Johnson held influence over a small but vibrant group of under-recognised writers for a brief time. It is with this in mind that the early parts of this thesis demonstrated that Johnson is not a lone voice, but simply the loudest amongst many.

The New Fiction provided resources by which Johnson's isolation could be addressed and amended. Chapter 1 of this thesis employed Gordon's anthology to expand upon Johnson's own critical writing from *Aren't You Rather Young*, exploring the comparisons invited by *Beyond the Words*, and constructing an overview of The New Fiction as an active group of writers. Supporting evidence from publishers' records and personal correspondence confirmed that the convergences in these writers' critical arguments was not a product of Gordon's editorship, but a known and actively-pursued association of sympathetic individuals. What emerged from this process was a set of concise arguments about the modern novel. Common critiques were made of a literary mainstream failing to recognise the threat posed to the medium of print by a lack of innovation in the face of emergent narrative media. Common assertions were made that a new approach to writing,

attentive to these issues, inventive of new subject matter and new literary form equipped to engage with a contemporary technological climate, was necessary.

Chapter 2 of this thesis took these arguments as fundamental principles for this New Fiction as a creative and critical entity, placing The New Fiction in context alongside contrasting and comparable literary movements including The Movement and the *Nouveau Roman*. Rather than glossing over The New Fiction as a loose association of writers, this thesis situated the critical arguments and creative methodologies developed by its members within a trajectory of innovative writing. As with Chapter 1's contextual situation of Johnson, Chapter 2 denied the notion of The New Fiction as a rejectable anomaly, instead supplying evidence for a close and deliberate relationship established by publisher John Calder between it and the French writers immediately precedent. Resultantly, The New Fiction was defined as a twofold entity, both an association of like-minded innovative British writers (of which Johnson was himself an integral part), and a critical perspective on the contemporary novel held and exhibited by those writers.

What remained following the assertions made about The New Fiction in Chapters 1 and 2 was proof of its value as a contextual and critical framework. This was achieved by way of two case studies into writing by New Fiction authors, examining whether indeed The New Fiction lent new and valid context to existing studies of those works, and an applicable critical perspective to the reading of those works. The selection of B.S. Johnson for this purpose was crucial; because he was a central defining figure influencing the development of The New Fiction framework at every level, it was necessary to examine his works for evidence of its arguments and ideologies put into practice. Chapter 3 considered the critical avenues made available by applying The New Fiction context in relation to the existing bodies of criticism, and employed the methodological and ideological understanding of contemporary writing supplied by The New Fiction to read two Johnson novels, *Albert Angelo* and *The Unfortunates*. It emerged through these readings that The New Fiction was indeed applicable in a number of ways. In context, it provided useful comparisons with contemporaries broadly overlooked by existing studies. Critically, The New Fiction lens avoided the conservatism and flippancy exhibited by earlier criticism of Johnson's writing, finding in The New Fiction's terminologies more appropriate means to read the various formal and linguistic devices employed in his novels, whilst avoiding the

language of experimentalism. His repeated demands to Quin's publisher for material, his intention to quote Quin in his provisional title, and his continued critical interest in her work in subsequent years confirmed that Gordon viewed Quin as a crucial component of The New Fiction. With a significantly smaller profile than Johnson, the body of criticism concerning Quin is sparse, and Chapter 4 sought to address this by using The New Fiction to establish the same combination of contextual and critical material which benefitted the reading of Johnson. Again the value and applicability of The New Fiction was confirmed; readings of *Passages* and *Three* were greatly enhanced by the contextual situation of Quin amongst her peers, and by the critical terminologies and approaches to reading which The New Fiction supplies.

Though The New Fiction framework was demonstrably productive in the reading of authors collected in its name, this reading was confined to a distinctly historical perspective. The New Fiction was recognisable as a product of its time, and though the given context illuminated areas of study of Johnson's work – and the lack of studies of Quin's – the treatment of The New Fiction as a loose, retroactive case study remained tied to the notion of the group's failure. The latter section of this thesis aimed to address this issue by examining the potential impact The New Fiction could have for the twenty-first century reader. Chapter 5 summarised the return of Johnson's and Quin's novels – and much of Johnson's non-fiction – to publication since 2003, demonstrating the clear need to reassess The New Fiction's positioning as a late twentieth-century anomaly. If The New Fiction was to be more than simply a historical aberration, it would need to be demonstrated that the critical trajectory to which it belongs is ongoing, and that the writing it describes continues to hold relevance. Chapter 5 also sought to summarise the range of post-millennial literary criticism which holds clear parallels to The New Fiction's arguments. In doing so, it was demonstrated that arguments about print media in relation to emergent technologies, the ability of the novel to adapt and borrow from other media, and the impulse to do so without a flippant experimentalism, continue to hold an influential place in contemporary critical thought about the novel.

As with Chapter 2, the indication of a valuable place in twenty-first century literary criticism required proof, and Chapters 6 and 7 aimed to employ The New Fiction framework, within this post-millennial context, in two further case studies. In Chapter 6,

we saw that Mark Z. Danielewski is a commercially successful twenty-first century novelist exhibiting both the devices and methodologies associated with The New Fiction, and the authorial intent to locate the print novel with its present-day technological climate which they encouraged. *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* were used to demonstrate the extent to which the terminologies and reading approaches demanded by Johnson, Gordon, and their peers, continued to provide both context and critical perspective to the reading of Danielewski's work. Comparisons to New Fiction writing were employed to indicate that, whilst similar devices were indeed used, the crucial factor tying the selected writers together was the expressed intent behind their use. Though situated in a new technological climate, Danielewski's writing showed that both the critical arguments and the novelistic methodology of The New Fiction remained a helpful framework for reading twenty-first century fiction. Jonathan Safran Foer, considered in Chapter 7, serves to further demonstrate the constructive application of The New Fiction framework, especially in relation to his novels *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Tree of Codes*. Occupying difficult territory between the novel and a work of visual art, Foer's books help to identify some of the limitations of The New Fiction, allowing key distinctions to be drawn between the use of key novelistic devices, and novelistic intent. Here, The New Fiction was revealed to be a more broadly applicable critical lens, providing definition for and engaging in dialogue regarding works which fall outside of its own criteria.

The argument presented in the first half of the thesis is contextual, asserting that B.S. Johnson is far from an isolated, solitary figure, but is instead a figurehead for a broader group of like-minded literary innovators which itself warrants closer examination than has thus far been made. This is shown by close comparisons between Johnson and his peers, and the coherent critical framework which can be constructed by way of those comparisons. The second half of the thesis lifts this framework and updates its application for the twenty-first century context to which The New Fiction's writing – both creative and critical – now belongs, by virtue of its republication. In this re-application of its ways of thinking is shown the continued validity of The New Fiction as a point of comparison with twenty-first century novelistic practice, and as valuable context underpinning contemporary literary criticism's consideration of the relationships between printed novels and newer technology.

## 8.2 A Future for The New Fiction

It is not only B.S. Johnson who benefits from this re-examination of The New Fiction context to which he belongs. Johnson, Quin and Giles Gordon, are presented at the forefront of a short-lived but remarkably resilient and influential movement. Other writers selected for Gordon's anthology deserve further discussion. Some, like Gabriel Josipovici, Alan Burns, or Eva Figes, have writing careers extending beyond the time period outlined by *Beyond the Words*, and beyond the parameters for a New Fiction laid out therein. Each of these achieved recognition as critics and novelists long after the end of The New Fiction group, and warrant investigation regarding the extent to which the group's framework is sustained during the intervening period from the publication of *Beyond the Words* to the republication of Johnson and Quin in the 2000s. Others, such as Maggie Ross, remain almost completely ignored by literary criticism, and a project similar to that made in Chapter 4 of this thesis could establish the extent to which their connection to The New Fiction is evident in their writing beyond Gordon's selection. There is, as a result of this thesis, a wider and more comprehensive study yet to be conducted on The New Fiction framework and the entirety of writers who fall within it.

There are aspects of literary criticism raised in the case studies made in this thesis which also warrant further examination. The New Fiction's rejection of experimentalism is applied as a template against which existing criticism of selected works can be judged. Having demonstrated that is a productive approach, this thesis presents an opportunity to further examine the employment of the critical language of experimentalism. This thesis shifted focus from British writing in the twentieth century to American writing in the twenty-first century, and the efficacy with which The New Fiction lens was applied suggests a broader examination of post-millennial American innovative writing and its relationship to the experimental. The frameworks provided by texts such as the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* provide – as with Gordon's or Miller's anthologies discussed in Chapter 2 – a selection of authors defined as experimental. The context provided by New Fiction opens new channels to challenge this selection, providing an alternative view of literary innovation which is sceptical of applying the terminologies of experimentalism.

In addition, there is a broader body of works which, though not falling under The New Fiction banner, nevertheless occupy the contested territory between printed text and



new media during the twentieth century. The *Nouveau Roman* provided some direct points of comparison, but there are other parallels present in works like Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1966 -), an ongoing work-in-progress constituting a visual and poetic treatment of the 1892 W.H. Mallock novel, *A Human Document*. Employing devices and processes similar to both Burns' collages in *Dreamerika!* or Foer's erasure of *Street of Crocodiles* in *Tree of Codes*, Phillips's work continues to excavate new meaning from Mallock's pages both visually and textually, with further editions of *A Humument* published in 1986, 1998, 2004, and 2012. Comparisons also lie in Phillips' attention to technology, with the development of an interactive *Humument* app which allows for digital engagement with the text and its variants. A second example is Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*, a 1962 novel with an even more extreme treatment of the form than *The Unfortunates* in its aim to achieve randomness, comprising 150 individual unbound pages. Formal comparison is invited alongside clearly-stated narrative goals, and Saporta's novel was also republished in the twenty-first century by Visual Editions. Technology is again pushed to the fore in this second text with an accompanying app which employs new technologies to provide fresh form of access and new interactions with a re-emergent innovative text.

The critical arguments examined throughout this thesis are unified across decades by the notion that, when confronted by new technologies, the print novel continues to reinvent and reshape itself to sustain the essential newness asserted by its name. Twenty-first century novelists such as Foer or Danielewski are rightfully recognised as authors actively engaged in this process, borrowing from other media and other technologies and yet retaining the print novel at the very core of their writing practices. With the proliferation of new reading technologies in the twenty-first century, it is perhaps easy to identify such approaches to the novel as a distinctly twenty-first century phenomenon. Yet, every era has its 'new media', and consideration of historical context dispels the view of such writers as members of an avant-garde fringe minority. Johnson, Gordon, Quin, and their cohorts provide ample demonstration of the negative impact this view can produce, their writing almost condemned to obscurity, unrecognised by the conservative mainstream as the serious, conscientious treatment of the reality they perceived. The success of writers such as Danielewski or Foer suggests that such critical conservatism is

less of a burden, and that today's mainstream is indeed ready to engage with the novelist's technical and technological challenges. The deaths of Johnson and Quin might have condemned The New Fiction before it even began life as a literary movement, but the endeavours of Gordon, and twenty-first century academics and publishers, to preserve the ideas about writing practice embodied in their work may yet be successful. This thesis urges a recognition of the trajectory upon which the technological challenges posed to print fall, and an openness to rediscovery for writers only now recognisable as innovative, engaged with new media, conscientious, most certainly unorthodox, but fundamentally novelistic.

## 9.0 Appendices

Appendix i: Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* p. 121 (New York: Pantheon, 2001)

148 See Exhibit One.

Thus, as well as prompting formal inquiries into the ever elusive internal shape of the house and the rules governing those shifts, Sebastiano Perouse de Montclos also broaches a much more commonly discussed matter: the question of occupation. Though few will ever agree on the meaning of the configurations or the absence of style in that place, no one has yet to disagree that the labyrinth is still a house.<sup>151</sup> Therefore the question soon arises whether or not it is someone's house. Though if so whose? Whose was it or even whose *is* it? Thus giving voice to another suspicion: could the owner still be there? Questions which echo the snippet of gospel Navidson alludes to in his letter to Karen<sup>152</sup>—St. John, chapter 14—where Jesus says:

In my Father's house are many rooms: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you . . .

Something to be taken literally as well as ironically.<sup>153</sup>

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(New York: American Elsevier, 1996) in which Quine applies Corbusier's Five Points to the Navidson house, thereby proving, in his mind, the limitations and hence irrelevance of Palladian grammar. While these conclusions are somewhat questionable, they are not without merit. In particular, Quine's treatment of the Villa Savoye and the Domino House deserves special attention. Finally consider Gisele Urbanati Rowan Lell's far more controversial piece "Polypod Or Polyolith?: The Navidson Creation As Mechanistic/ Linguistic Model" in *Abaku Banner Catalogue*, v. 198, January 1996, p. 515-597, in which she treats the "house-shifts" as evidence of polyolithic dynamics and hence structure. For a point of reference see Greenfield and Schneider's "Building a Tree Structure. The Development of Hierarchical Complexity and Interrupted Strategies in Children's Construction Activity" in *Developmental Psychology*, 13, 1977, p. 299-313.

<sup>151</sup>Which also happens to maintain a curious set of constants. Consider —

Temperature: 32°F ± 8.  
 Light: absent.  
 Silence: complete\*  
 Air Movement (i.e. breezes, drafts etc.): none  
 True North: DNE

\*With the exception of the 'grol'.

<sup>152</sup>See Chapter XVII.  
<sup>153</sup>Also not to be forgotten is the terror Jacob feels when he encounters the territories of the divine: "How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:17)

time—148  
myth, and finally  
Dynasties, eventually  
Kings, Emperors,  
(P), whether Bishops,  
the names of Patrons  
have begun to fade into  
the authors of buildings  
though here the names of  
Celer, Dædalus—  
Damascus, Severus,  
Apollodorus of  
Petriz, Gunzo,  
Pisano, Pedro  
Suger (P), Nicola  
d'Orbais, Abbot  
Casimier (P), Jean  
Bishop Bernard de  
Jean de Loubinère,  
William of Sens,  
Englismann,  
William the  
Henry de Reynes,  
Henry Yevle,  
Robert Janyus,  
William Wynford,  
Arruda, Diogo Boyac,  
Peter Parler, Diogo  
Hans von Burghausen,  
Heinrich von Brunsberg,  
Wenzel Koriczer,  
Ulrich von Enstingen,  
Esler, Jörg Ganghofer,  
Heinzelmann, Nicolaus  
Benedikt Ried, Konrad  
Lorenzo Maliani,  
Arnolfo di Cambio,  
Juan Gil de Hontañón,  
Cologne, Juan Guas,  
Brunelleschi, Simon of  
Alberti, Filippo  
Vinci, Leon Battista  
Filarete, Leonardo da  
Donato Bramante,  
Sangallo the Elder,  
Younger, Antonio da  
Antonio da Sangallo the  
Raffaello Sanzio,  
Balducci Peruzzi,  
Giulio Romano,  
Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
Sannichelli,  
Sansovino, Michele  
Vignola, Jacopo Tatti  
Giacomo Barozzi da  
Domenico Fontana,  
Bass, Galeazzo Alessi,  
Andrea Palladio, Martini  
Breton, Pietro Ligorio,  
Pierre Lescol, Gilles le  
Philibert de l'Orme,



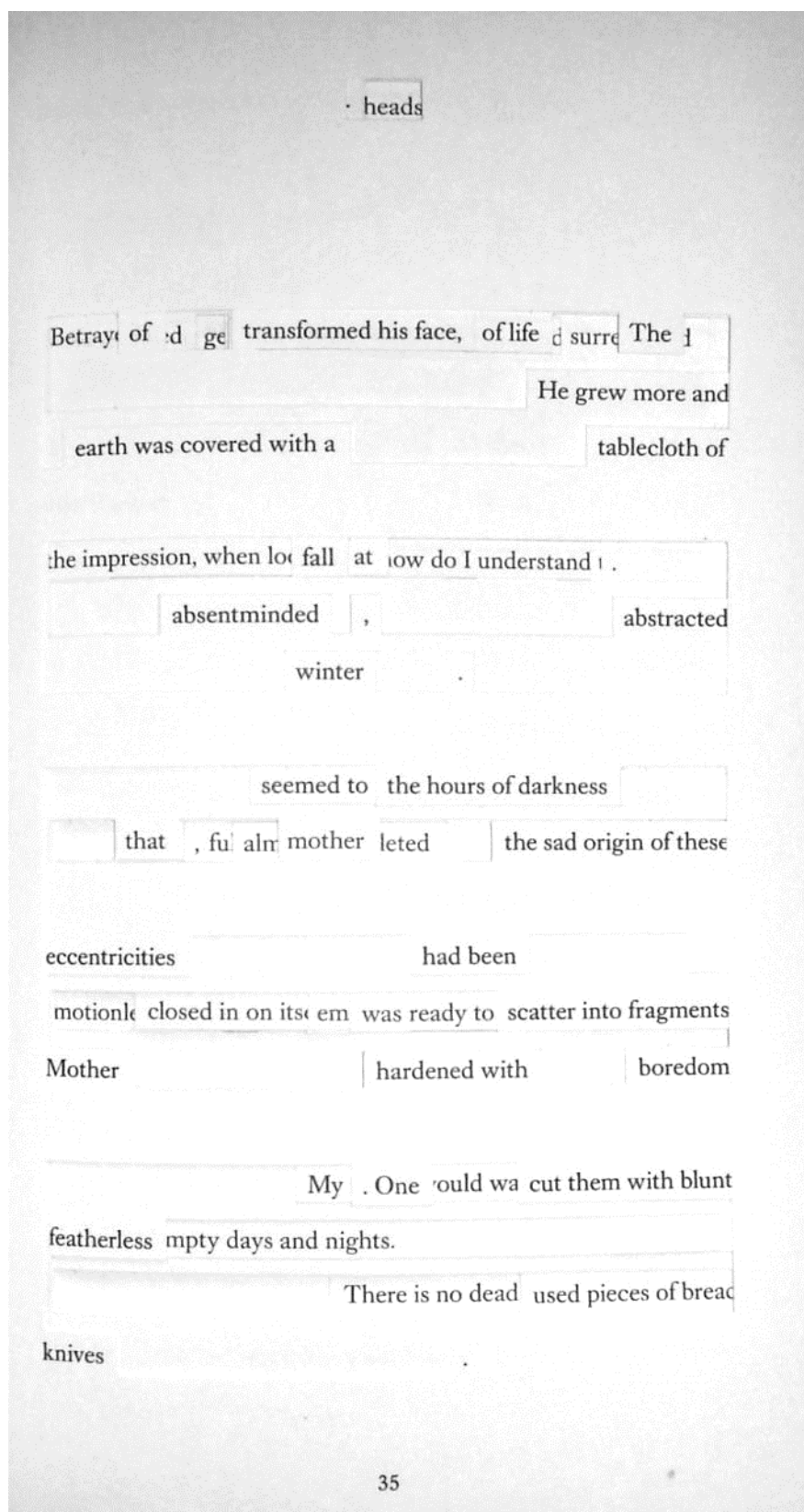
Appendix ii: Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* p. H71/S290 (London: Doubleday, 2006)

*Aug 12 1968*

Bikinians return.  
Starving Biafrans.  
Addis Ababa.  
Prague, Warsaw Pact  
Nations & Soviets tanks.  
France, Pacific & A-Bomb.  
—World is.  
Chicago, 178 arrested.  
John Gordon Mein goes.  
—Pigs, pigs, oink, oink.  
Mayor Daley's Men.  
McCarthy raided.  
Last 12 free.  
Iran quake, 8,000 go.  
Tel Aviv bomb.  
Swaziland free.  
Huey Newton convicted.  
Caroline & JFK carrier.  
Arthur Ashe's Open.  
Illinois 300.  
Mediterranean &  
French jet, 95 go.  
400 Viet Cong go.  
Carol Jenkins goes.  
Mexico's National  
University, 18 go.  
Zond 5.  
Caetano over Salazar.  
55 Nigerians go.  
Greek Colonels.  
Iran, Soviet Union & treaty.  
Discover.  
Rhodesia's State of Emergency.  
Mates & Rio Grande Dam.  
autonomy, Eisenhower, Lopez  
UK, Greece & Turkey: Cyprus  
Fort Royal boycott & 22 more.  
Vanguard II's weather.  
Cuban Premier & Castro.  
St Louis tornado, 22 go.  
Moscow & Peking expansion.  
Iran (CBM).  
Holly, Richardson & Valens go.  
Mason City snow.  
President of Congress.  
& Peaceful desegregation.  
Arlington, Norfolk  
US Space Flight & NASA's 110.  
American Airline coasts.  
& general walkout.  
Buenos Aires, transport workers  
Atomic generator & a hat.  
New Delhi's Gandhi.

*Jan 14 1959*

Sam then's fugazi at the Wheel,  
tarring for Edge City, allways  
scarfing the turns.  
Keyed up anyway for  
divagating leagues, blurring  
Potawatomes, Stumblebums  
and Banshees.  
But I'm the only range by a stranger  
ferocity. One I cannot meet but  
must seek. Until it defeats me.  
While Sam's the freak,  
free maybe but weak.  
A goof.  
Antic with acne.  
High and tight doof. Feckless with  
freckles and nothing to lose.  
Race. Hold. Except O those  
Green Eyes with flecks of Gold.  
—And his smile,  
Smooth Azalea bold.  
He slows. Pulls over.  
Because we're free.  
behind US.  
And allways we will leave US  
and I'm the littlest part of me.  
Because we are the littlest part of we  
by Fromberg, Rockvale. At terrifying speeds.  
of every peculiar moment, rapping along 10, 310.  
While Hailey's pristine to sleek. The astonishment  
which I'm too teen to treat let alone pop.  
Hiding. A smatter of pimples on freckly cheeks.  
And me just hanging on for the haul. Appalling.  
Gold Eyes with flecks of Green.  
& stiff. Hailey beyond squeam.  
Carolina Parakeets dead. Worldhit  
WhamO off.

Appendix iii: Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* p. 35 (London: Visual Editions, 2011)

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